ARGOSY

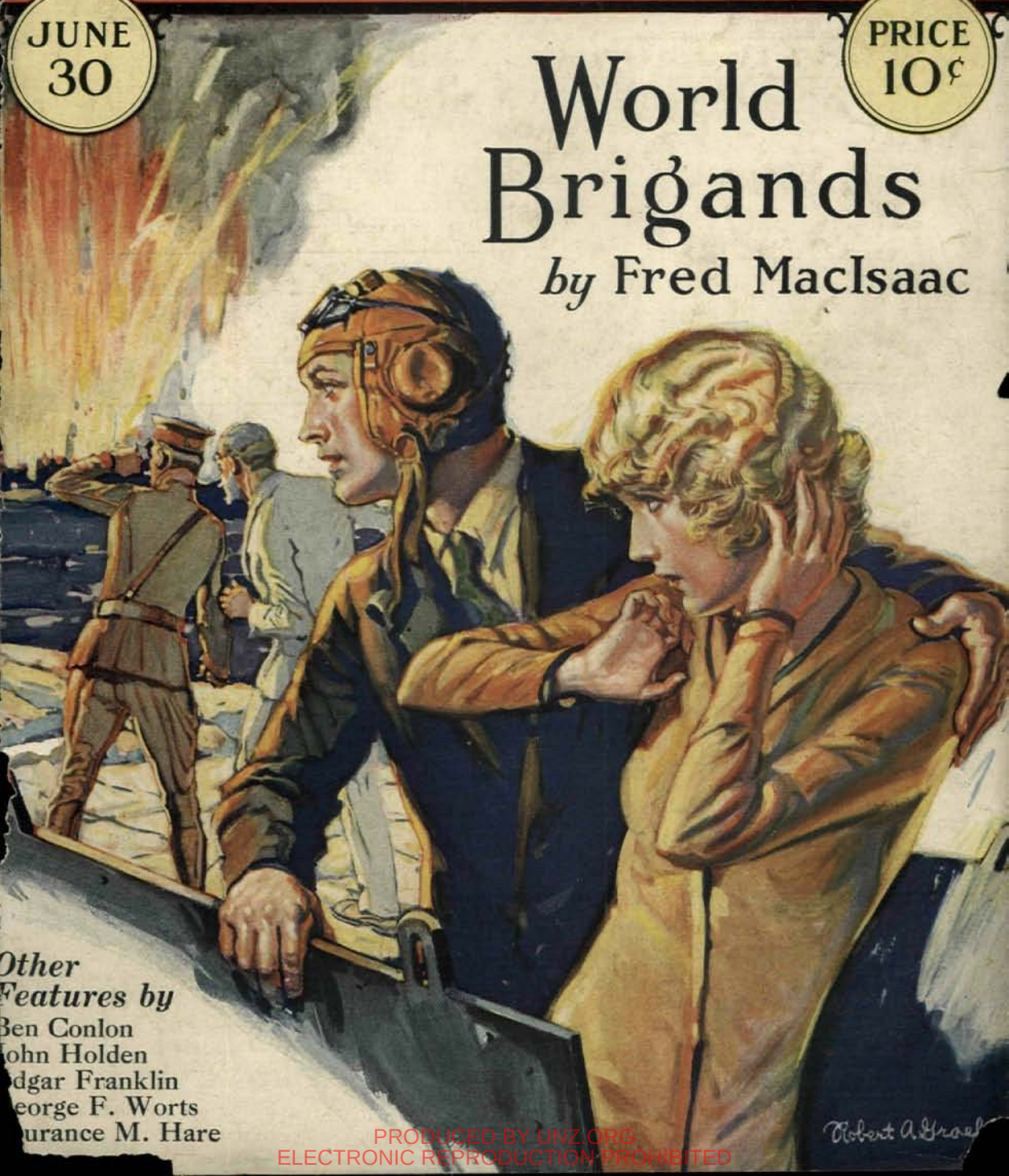
ALL-STORY WEEKLY

JUNE 30

PRICE 10¢

World Brigands

by Fred MacIsaac



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This magazine is on sale every Wednesday throughout the United States and Canada

THE FRANK A. MUNSEY COMPANY, 280 BROADWAY, NEW YORK, and
LONDON: HACHETTE & CIE., 16-17 King William Street, Charing Cross, W.C. 2
PARIS: HACHETTE & CIE., 111 Rue Réaumur

WILLIAM T. DEWART, President and Treasurer — RICHARD H. TITHERINGTON, Vice-President and Secretary

PUBLISHED WEEKLY AND COPYRIGHT, 1928, BY THE FRANK A. MUNSEY COMPANY

Single copies, 10 cents. By the year, $4.00 in United States, its dependencies, Mexico and Cuba; $7.00 to Canada and Foreign Countries. Remittances should be made by check, express money order or postal money order. Currency should not be sent unless registered

Entered as second-class matter November 28, 1896, at the post-office at New York, under the Act of March 3, 1879

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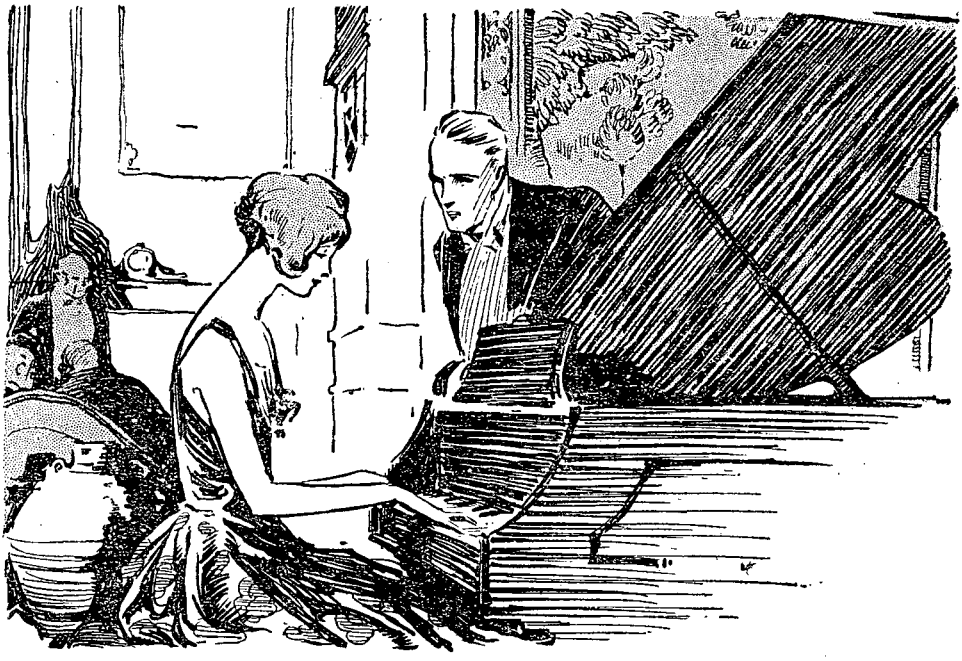
VOLUME 196 SATURDAY, JUNE 30, 1928 NUMBER 1



World Brigands

When big business pays the fiddler it calls the tune: and its mad dance in 1940 involved the fate of five nations

By FRED MacISAAC

Author of "The Great Commander," "The Pancake Princess," etc.

CHAPTER I.

A VERY GREAT MAN.

"DICK BOSWELL? Well, he's a good deal of an ass, but decent, pater; rich as mud, generous, yet a living rebuttal of the impression that Yankees are keen."

Roger Tuttle, only son of Sir Augustus Tuttle, baronet, laughed rather vapidly, and his father regarded him with disfavor.

"Your own sort, I perceive," he said sourly.

Roger winced. "That's a dirty dig, of course. I fancy I am as alert as the

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next one. Dick's a likable idiot even if he is dull."

"I dislike Americans," stated Sir Augustus.

"Insular prejudice," retorted his impudent offspring.

"Perhaps," replied the father in a tone which discouraged further chatter. "Have him down if you like, but keep him out of my way."

So it was under such terms that Richard Boswell, Jr., was invited to Winstut Abbey.

Sir Augustus Tuttle might have posed for one of the portraits of eighteenth century English squires which hung in the portrait gallery of the Abbey. He was short and solidly built, slightly bow-legged, with unusually long arms and unusually short legs.

His head was large and widened by mutton chop whiskers of iron gray. His face was round and brick red, as though he had drunk a couple of bottles of port with his dinner for a generation; though, he happened to be very temperate.

A fox hunting, hard drinking gentleman of the old school, a survival of the days of good Queen Victoria, living on to be an example to the Briton of the year of our Lord 1940 of what an English landlord ought to be—that's what he looked like.

He often secured substantial satisfaction by a visit to the portrait gallery and imagined that the portraits returned his approving gaze. He was growing to consider them as portraits of his ancestors, though his veins contained no trace of the blood of the extinct Winstuts.

England in 1940 was turned upside down, and the world as well, and Sir Augustus Tuttle had come from the bottom to be on top. For many generations the Tuttles had been tinkers, than which there was no more lowly vocation in the tight little island.

Gus Tuttle's father had married a barmaid who had insisted upon her only son being given a board school education. If the war had not happened in 1914, it is very unlikely that Gus Tuttle would have ever amounted to much of anything; but the war was the beginning of the turning over of the world.

In England the officers of the army and navy had always been gentlemen, and the chances for a private soldier to rise to the rank of commissioned officer were about the same as that of the proverbial camel passing through the eye of a needle.

England threw her regular army of one hundred thousand men, officered by the best blood in the Isles, into the path of the German Juggernaut. The best blood, almost to a man, died at the head, not in the rear of their troops, as they had always been trained to do.

Nearly every man of noble or gentle birth went into the army during the first year of the war, and most of them died; which weakened the caste system by puncturing the upper crust of it and leaving wide openings for what was underneath to rise to the top.

Gus Tuttle rose. His early training in a public house came to his aid and made him very useful in the division of supplies. He served in France, to be sure, but his service, while arduous, was not very perilous and his health was not undermined by bad food.

When the war was over he returned wearing the uniform of a temporary colonel and he found life at home to be very different from what it used to be.

Now there were all sorts of opportunities for young men of the lower middle class to make something of themselves, openings where openings had never been before. Parliament, formerly a gentleman's club, was already very short of gentlemen.

Persons who had been in trade were running things. Money was so scarce that those who had it were not asked where they got it, and this happened to be convenient for Gus Tuttle, for he had money. With the same shrewd-

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ness which had enabled him to line his pockets in the service of his country, he was chary of displaying his resources, but gradually he let himself out.

It was a time when excellent business opportunities were going begging, when factories and shops could be bought for a song because their owners could no longer carry on. Tuttle invested astutely.

He knew that America had captured England's foreign trade and it would be years before English manufacturers could get it back, so he avoided concerns that depended for life upon exporting their products.

Stocks were at a low ebb and he bought stocks. He purchased food shops, for people must eat, and drapers' shops, because they must wear clothing. He prospered.

A famous London newspaper was for sale for a tenth of its value about 1921 and he became its owner. He stood for Parliament and was elected triumphantly. He was one of those who held up England's arms when they were so weak they had to be held up by patriotic subjects, and supported the government's determination to keep the pound sterling at par.

As he grew rich he learned how to avoid giving most of his income to the government in war taxes, and he learned how to talk good English and shake off the cockneyism's of his youth. He bought more newspapers and prospered by the tremendous influx of advertising from American manufacturers. He grew so rich they created for him a baronetcy for distinguished war services and a liberal contribution to the Conservative campaign fund.

He had purchased Winstut Abbey and established himself there as a country gentleman. He had married the widow of a major who had laid down his life at Mons. He sent his son to Oxford and his daughter to Girton. He tried to ride to hounds, to live on his lands, and to demean himself like one of the Winstuts who hung in the gallery.

His business interests were so vast in 1940 that he could not possibly have resided at Winstut were it not for the airplanes. He commuted to London three or four days a week, making the journeyed in an hour by plane, although the Abbey was more than a hundred miles north of London.

Sir Augustus Tuttle was about the richest and most influential subject of the king, the biggest man in the Conservative party, and could be prime minister any time he lifted his little finger, so people said.

From the great gateway of his estate on the King's Highway to the house, the road wound through an ancient forest for nearly half a mile before coming in sight of the Abbey.

At the rear of the residence was a landing field where two airplanes of the latest model were always ready to take the master where he wished to go, while there were usually several visiting planes, some of them of foreign manufacture, indicating visitors from abroad.

They say that the American business man does much of his most important business during his two-hour luncheon period, and it is certain that the British business man puts over many of his business deals during week-end parties.

At least twice a month Sir Augustus invited a number of guests to spend a week-end with him, and as he was the busiest man in England, you may be sure that he did not waste this time.

To see this fat, round, pink little man with his curious side whiskers and his small, pale, blue eyes one would imagine him anything but a dynamo of energy. In fact, he was like a racing engine hidden under the hood of a short, squat, hideous, low-priced British motor car.

If one may compare Sir Augustus to such an engine and automobile his son Roger may be likened to a gor-

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geous imposing motor car without an engine at all.

Roger was twenty-one and had been sent down from Oxford, which means expelled in Americanese. He was just under six feet in height, as handsome as his father was plain, an admirable athlete, good-natured, pleasant, well-mannered, and as empty as a drum. From his mother's people he had drawn his good looks, and he should have inherited some of his father's intelligence; but he hadn't.

Sir Augustus had long since given up hope that his son would carry on his work. He liked the boy and despised him. He was confident that Roger would scatter to the four winds of heaven all the millions his father had accumulated if they were intrusted to his care, so the will which he had had drawn and which he had signed, confided the fortune to trustees who would pay the income in equal shares to his son and daughter. Of Vesta Tuttle, more later.

For the next week-end the magnate had invited six very important individuals, Vesta had asked four women, and Roger had summoned a new friend, an American, Dick Boswell.

After Roger had taken himself off, Sir Augustus turned to his secretary, a thin bespectacled young woman as plain as she was competent.

"Get Marsden," he snapped. "In an hour I want all possible information on this Richard Boswell."

In an hour she set before him a typewritten sheet upon which was set down the following data:

Richard Boswell, Jr.—Son of Richard Boswell of Detroit, Michigan, manufacturer of the Boswell Family Airplane, rated in Dun's as worth fifty million dollars. He is twenty-seven years of age, was graduated from Harvard University in 1934, football, polo, and baseball letter man, American champion amateur swimmer.

Employed for two years in father's plant in Detroit, dismissed as incompetent. Published small book of poems of no merit, backed a New York theatrical production and dropped thirty thousand dollars. Arrived in London six months ago.

Moves in high social circles, seems content with idleness. General impression is that he is not very intelligent. Seems to have no interests beyond amusements. Spends money very freely. So far as is known is on good terms with his father.

Sir Augustus perused this dossier and laughed nastily.

"Might be a sketch of Roger save for the book of poems," he observed. "Evidently just what Roger said he was, a harmless ass. Put him on the invitation list."

CHAPTER II.

FROM A BENCH IN HYDE PARK.

A VERY resplendent person strolled through Hyde Park. He wore the shining, high-crowned, flat-brimmed silk tile which had come in that year, the short-skirted frock coat, the very wide trousers of light gray which completed afternoon costume and a light cane. A cheerful but not at all beautiful countenance looked over the top of the very high starched collar of the period.

As he passed each bench he was counting. "Four, five, six, seventh bench from the west gate," he said aloud. "Nobody on it. Good."

He seated himself, thereby creating a commotion among three nursemaids at a bench fifty feet away, who fluttered as nursemaids do in the presence of strange and attractive males, for he was attractive even if he were not handsome, and he was perfectly appointed.

A moment later an old woman wearing an official cap and carrying a bag stopped before him and extended him a ticket which he accepted and handed her a shilling.

"Keep the change," he said loftily. As the charge for occupying a bench

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was a penny, this was munificent largess. She looked overwhelmed, managed a "Thank ye kindly, sir," and toddled off.

The young man inspected with apparent casualness the passers-by, cocked an eye at a flirtatious stenographer out of work, then shook his head as she betrayed a tendency to join him.

Presently a person dressed like a working man in poor circumstances, wearing the bowler hat which will endure as long as the Union Jack, approached, hesitated, then sat himself beside the dandy upon the bench.

"If ye don't mind, sir?" he apologized.

"Not at all," said the young man nervously. He minded very much.

The workman drew out a blackened clay pipe, filled it, struck a match and lighted it, then leaned back with a sigh of satisfaction.

"J.R. V.X." he said surprisingly.

The youth looked astonished. "K. S. W.," he replied. "I thought you were butting in and I'd have trouble getting rid of you."

The man laughed softly. He had a round face, bushy black eyebrows and a thick, badly cared for mustache. His nose was short, his mouth unusually large, and his chin not in the least prominent, a typical taxi driver or runner or even a navvy. Yet when he spoke his accent was American.

"We have to be careful how we hold our conferences," he said. "You've been here six months, Mr. Boswell. You've done a good job. Now the fun begins."

"What's it all about?" asked Dick Boswell. "I've obeyed orders blindly, made the right acquaintances, got into the right clubs, made a blithering chump of myself, and I don't know in the least what for. I don't know who you are or why you're disguised as a cockney carpenter or whatever you're made up for. I don't even know for whom I am working."

The man laughed quietly. "Oh, yes, you do; you're working for the United States of America."

"Of course, I know that," he said aggrievedly. "I know who hired me for nothing a year."

"You get the same pay I do. We love our country, you and I, but when she depends upon private citizens to work without pay for her preservation she is asking a lot. You're a rich man, Mr. Boswell. I am poor and my expenses are paid by a certain banker in New York out of his own pocket."

"I thought it would be a life of excitement," Boswell grumbled. "Shots in the dark, a flash of steel, shadowers on my trail, instead I am making a monkey of myself for the benefit of British society."

"Haven't you any idea what's up?"

"Of course, I know that all Europe hates us and intrigues against us and may some day jump us if we don't watch out, but I knew that before I flew across the Atlantic."

"You have been invited to spend the week-end at Winstut Abbey."

"How the heck did you know that?"

"I know. That invitation is the reason you are in England, Boswell. Sir Augustus Tuttle is the worst enemy America has in Europe, and in becoming intimate with his son you have done us a service that no one else could have done.

"Before you got the invitation, Tuttle undoubtedly had you looked up. He found that your father is a multi-millionaire, that you are a useless idler, fired by your own parent for shiftlessness, a bum poet—just a horrible example of a rich man's son without sense enough to come in out of the wet."

"You know why father fired me and why the rotten poems were published," said the young man bitterly. "And you know why I have to act like a goof."

"Yep. So you'd get invited eventually to Winstut Abbey," grinned the Unknown. "It's about time you were

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put into the possession of some facts if you are to be of use to us down there."

"For Heaven's sake tell me something."

"You are aware, of course, that Europe is groaning under the increasing size of the annual payments of her war debt to America. You are aware that for a dozen years after the debt agreements she paid them by borrowing the money from private individuals in America, by selling her bonds in our market."

"Everybody knows that."

"The situation is that she owes just as much as she ever did, only American citizens instead of the American government is holding one of the bags."

"I know you can't sell an European bond or borrow a dollar for Europe in the American market to-day."

"Precisely. For two or three years they have had to dig into their own socks to meet their way payments, and it hurts like hell. Each year the payment is bigger and the sock is almost empty. They don't feel that they can make the grade. In addition we have captured the markets of the world, and they are unable to compete with us and their own revenue is being sunk in armaments."

"I am aware of all that."

"What's going to happen?"

"I suppose they will eventually refuse to make the war payments and repudiate their obligations to foreign bond holders."

"And when that happens what?"

"They will ruin their own credit and go to the dogs. Their currency will hit bottom. International bankruptcy."

"Supposing, like Sir Augustus Tuttle, you were worth a billion dollars. You would hate to see each dollar sink in value to a nickel, wouldn't you?"

"Rather."

"So would all the magnates of England, France, and Germany. So they are seeking another way out."

"Such as what?"

"Declare war on America, collect a hundred billion dollars indemnity after forcing cancellation of all American claims, and set Europe firmly on its feet at the expense of the United States."

Boswell laughed scornfully. "Fat chance. What would we be doing? And these nations have had enough of war to last them a hundred years."

"It's twenty-two years since the Armistice," said the Unknown. "They have a new generation of soldiers. The horrors of war have been replaced in their minds by the glory of war. And it looks so easy. We are a fat goose ready for plucking."

"You mean these nations, these governments—"

"No," he laughed. "These financiers. We believe there is an international conspiracy among the men who pull the strings that make the government puppets move. The people, of course, are not being consulted any more than they were in 1914. You have seen something of the propaganda in the newspapers over here, particularly the Tuttle group?"

"Just the old rubbish of the Shylockism of Uncle Sam, of the avarice of wealthy America, squeezing the life blood out of poor old Europe. A lot of twaddle. We ought to cancel the indebtedness, though, and save trouble."

"Too late. The time was immediately after the Armistice. A new generation has grown up in America, a generation which is disgusted by the whimpering of Europe.

"Through our banking houses there are millions of holders of European bonds who would yell their heads off against repudiation, and Europe must repudiate the bonds sold to America as well as secure cancellation of debts. My boy, you'll find the American people adamant against cancellation and ready to take up arms against repudiation. It's a deadlock.

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"The American people don't like Europe any more, Europe hates us, and has every reason, in her mind, to attack us."

"What can we do?"

"Get the facts and put them before our government so conclusively that it will have to prepare for what's coming."

"I get you. Now what do I do?"

"Keep your eyes and ears open at Winstut, but do nothing to awaken suspicion. We wish you to become a habitué of that establishment. Find out who comes there, but don't let them have a glimmer that you are anything but a cheerful idiot."

He sighed. "I'll be the goat."

"In the old days," continued the Unknown, "one could trace the movements of great men, but, with the airplane, frontiers have vanished. Stutt, of Berlin, gets into his bus in his back yard and in a few hours descends behind Winstut Abbey, and nobody knows he has left his home."

"But suppose these conspirators are there under assumed names?"

"There will be placed in your room to-night a package of photographs of the men we want to know about. Memorize them and destroy them. That's the best I can do for you."

"There's a fellow over there looking at us. He's been sitting on that bench for ten minutes."

"I saw him. He can't overhear us, and I'll have him shadowed when he leaves."

Boswell laughed loudly and foolishly. "There seem to be several of us."

"Right," agreed the Unknown. "You better leave now. Drop in somewhere for tea. Make an ass of yourself, and for God's sake don't fall in love. A woman can see through a man."

"No danger." Again that vacant laugh.

"You ought to have been an actor," admired the Unknown.

"How about reporting to you?"

"I'll take care of that. Remember, this may be England and 1940, but old-fashioned methods of dealing with spies have not gone out. Don't step out of your rôle for a second. Hand me a couple of shillings for that fellow's benefit. I may have been telling you a hard luck story."

"You have. My hard luck," he laughed as he passed over the silver.

Dick Boswell, as he moved through the throng toward the Carleton tea room was turning over in his mind the revelation made to him by his chief and being much impressed thereby. So the sole purpose of two years of preparation was to equip him to become a familiar of Winstut Abbey.

It seemed a trivial goal for so much intensive preparation, yet if there actually was such a conspiracy as the Unknown had declared to exist he was cast for a very important rôle.

After graduation from college Dick had cheerfully entered his father's airplane plant and worked hard and conscientiously to learn the business from the bottom up. He and his father understood one another far better than most sons and fathers.

Richard, Sr., had begun life as an automobile mechanic, and Dick had been born in comparative poverty, so he was able to recognize the extraordinary ability which caused his father, during the son's boyhood, to lift himself to great wealth.

Of a mechanical turn of mind, he had chafed during his college years because he was forced to study instead of getting into the plant. He had displayed so much ability during his apprenticeship in the shop that Mr. Boswell assured him that he would soon occupy the vice president's chair.

And then, one night, life played him a strange trick. He came home from a dance to be summoned into his father's study. Mr. Boswell was seated opposite a man whom he had never seen before, but whom he recognized in-

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stantly from photographs, a man very high in the nation's service, a very great man who had since been elected President of the United States.

He was introduced, and the visitor inspected him in silence with gray eyes which seemed to bore him through.

"Glad to know you, Mr. Boswell," said the great man. "Having seen you, I believe all your father has told me about you. We are going to ask a lot of you, young man, but I shall let your father tell you about it, because I have already overstayed my time here. Seeing you has set my mind at rest."

His father escorted the visitor to his car, while Dick waited impatiently to learn what it was all about. Mr. Boswell was very solemn when he returned. He was a tall, thin man, with snow white hair and a face deeply lined from which two big blue eyes gleamed like electric lamps. He laid his right hand on his son's shoulder.

"Dick, lad," he said. "I have taken the liberty of making a promise for you."

"That's all right, dad," he laughed. "You take no liberty in doing that."

"Sit down, Dick, and I'll tell you about it." He seated himself.

"The first of January it was my intention to make you vice president," he said. "You have certainly earned the title. Instead you are to be fired, chucked out as a good for nothing."

"I say, dad!" he protested.

"You will go to New York and make as big a fool of yourself as you can, old boy. Do anything that will get your name in the papers as a high-powered imbecile. Keep it up for at least a year."

"I'm hanged if I do," he said.

"I promised."

"Oh, all right, but why?"

"Dick, you have been drafted into the service of your country, or, to be exact, you volunteered. I volunteered in your name. Believe me, you are terribly needed."

The boy's eyes flashed and his shoulders squared. "Thank you, dad," he said simply.

"After you have established a reputation for yourself of being quite without brains in New York, you are to go to London, where a person of your apparent character will be needed by America."

"What am I going to do in London?"

"As yet we do not know, only that a man of your type will be tremendously useful. I understand how keenly you are disappointed in being taken from the plant. I was depending upon you to take a load off my own shoulders. I assure you that this is much more important.

"Our government is a curious institution, Dick. We have no secret service worthy of the name, and Congress would not permit the establishment of anything which resembles the organizations of European governments.

"Over there they can demand the appropriation of a large sum for government business without being forced to account for it, but our Congress demands accounting to the last penny. As Mr. Merrick informed me to-night, there never was a time in our history when we required brilliant secret agents abroad to keep us informed of what is going on beneath the surface."

"I'm willing to serve the government for a time, but my lifework is building airplanes," he said. "What will my compensation be?"

"Nothing. A new arm of the service is being organized without the knowledge of anybody but the Secretary of State, and naturally there is no fund from which to make disbursements. I am setting aside a million dollars of my share of the expenses, thus there can never be a Congressional investigation which would defeat the purposes of the service. You, of course, will draw on me for anything you want, and you must draw heavily

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to make the impression required of you in New York."

Dick drew himself up. He said:

"I think you're the greatest man in America."

His father shook his head. "The greatest man in America has just left this house," he replied.

CHAPTER III.

IN CAP AND BELLS.

FOR an intelligent man to play the fool is not as difficult as for a fool to play an intelligent man; but it is distressing. Dick had many college friends in New York, and knew several charming young women, but these he speedily alienated by his foolish behavior.

At first they clung to him, unable to credit the evidence of their eyes and ears, but they could not resist his perseverence in idiocy. He was seen in public places with the most blatantly undesirable types of chorus girls, and he sought the company of the most vapid young men.

These welcomed him hilariously, and parasites came from every side when it was noised abroad that a new and sublimely wild type of spender had come to town. Their company was most repulsive to him, but he knew his job and suffered in secret.

Being naturally trenchant and amusing in conversation, he forced himself to be dull and boresome. With the aid of books of proverbs and adages he plastered his chatter with bromides and platitudes until he had driven off the last of his real friends.

He got grim amusement out of concocting poetic drivel, although he secretly considered his free verse as good as the average output from the self-styled intelligentsia. He shrieked with laughter when it was praised to the skies in a new thought magazine, the editor of which was one of his playmates in night clubs.

The poems drew some unpleasant comment in reputable newspapers. But he did not attain the publicity considered necessary for his rôle until he permitted a half-witted and not even ordinarily pretty young actress to persuade him to star her in a terrible drama by a moronic playwright whom she thought she loved.

It was condemned unanimously out of town, but Dick insisted upon dragging the piece into New York, which enabled the critics to cut loose with all their big guns of vituperation.

After this Dick, who secretly writhed to see his honored name held up for public ridicule, considered that he had done his job sufficiently well, and somewhat drew into himself, awaiting the summons to go abroad. During the year of torment in New York he had received no word from his unknown employer, and only very guarded letters from his father.

When the order came he took a suite upon the giant airplane which carried him to London. It was no longer considered good form to cross the ocean by steamship; in fact, it had been ten years since a new ocean passenger liner had been constructed by any steamship company. When he landed in London he found his reputation had preceded him.

In London he went to the Ritz, and by special messenger he received a letter containing laconic instructions.

"Join these clubs." Four were mentioned.

"Become intimate with these men." A list of eight. Heading the list was the name of Roger Tuttle.

An hour later the ink of the message faded from the paper.

Ordinarily it is not easy for an American to join an exclusive London club. London clubs are not so exclusive as they used to be, and those mentioned were not the most difficult.

In 1940 there were still remnants of the old aristocracy who foregathered and mourned the good old days. These

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had their clubs into which no parvenu might penetrate; but it was not with the genuine aristocracy that Dick Boswell's chief wished him to mingle.

Dick found it rather difficult to meet the men mentioned in his instructions. By scraping acquaintance with actresses, spending lavishly, giving big parties, and behaving idiotically, in time he was hail fellow well met with most of them, including Roger Tuttle.

Roger was given what his father considered a liberal allowance, but it was utterly inadequate to what he considered his needs in town; so he was charmed by Dick's determination to pay all checks, and speedily became his bosom friend.

Roger's conversation was not stimulating, and his vocabulary seemed to be confined to five or six hundred words, mostly British slang. But he was fond of exercise, and managed to get Dick into the one club which he had been unable to make, where there happened to be an excellent gymnasium.

In the course of time there had come the invitation to visit Winstut Abbey, which it appeared now had been his unknown goal.

Vesta Tuttle was inspecting the guest list which her father's secretary had placed in her hand. Since her mother's death, Vesta, of course, was hostess at the Abbey, and she took her duties seriously.

The late Lady Augustus Tuttle had been a beautiful woman. Augustus, when he was ready to marry, had been able to pick and choose. For her daughter she had done even better than for the handsome son.

Vesta was beautiful, as only a golden haired English blonde may be beautiful, and she had inherited more brains from Sir Augustus than he suspected.

Though, the greatest heiress in the kingdom, she was in no danger of being married for her money. She was not a cold, statuesque beauty, but warm, glowing, and vibrant. And she had that luscious complexion, compensation for much rain, almost continual dampness, absence of steam heat indoors, and contact with nature: the kind that is called, for lack of a better description, peaches and cream.

You might spend a day in London without seeing a really beautiful woman, but when she did come in sight you would take off your hat and put your hand on your heart and swear that a British beauty is more beautiful than any other.

If beauty is rare, a sense of humor is rarer, and Vesta had a sense of humor. She thought her father was funny, and Roger just too absurd.

She ran her eye down the list and paused at a name.

"Richard Boswell, Jr.," she exclaimed. "Can that be the creature that Roger plays around with?"

"Yes, Miss Vesta," said the secretary. "He is Roger's guest."

"But the man's impossible," she protested. "He is the jest of London and an American into the bargain. Father loathes Americans."

"Mr. Roger insisted."

"Probably the man insisted, and Roger owes him money. Well, put him in the walnut room. I wish father did not invite these Germans and Italians and French; their English is atrocious, and their manners are worse; they are not at all representative of their nations, except, perhaps, the Germans."

"Sir Augustus always has his reasons, miss."

"Oh, I know. But it's getting so I can't persuade a nice woman to come here. These people bore them to extinction."

The secretary smiled dryly. "I notice the gentlemen are always glad to come if you invite them."

Vesta smiled slightly. "I could get plenty of men; but father always has his quota—so I am forced to invite the girls."

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Then she set about the business of assigning rooms, and went to tell the bad news to the housekeeper, after which she changed into a sport costume and stepped into her own roadster which she drove forty miles to keep a tennis engagement.

Dick Boswell came down from town on the two ten Thursday, accompanied by Roger, who spent no more time at the synthetic ancestral home than his pocketbook and his father's admonitions compelled him.

It was a two and a half hours' ride, a long time for a man of wit to be shut up with young Tuttle. Dick had learned the trick, from association with morons, of closing up his ears to their chatter, nodding complacently now and then, and the lovely English countryside compensated him in part for the company.

Dick had seen nothing of England outside London, which he had left upon a dull September afternoon. The perpetual gloom cloud which serves as atmosphere for the great city was pierced shortly afterward by shafts of sunlight, the sky gradually turned from brownish gray to a bright blue.

They darted across dark green pastures, through stately parks, over little silver streams by means of quaint stone bridges, penetrating what seemed fairy country. Now and then they glimpsed a majestic manor house, and then sighted a group of straw thatched cottages.

Again they looked upon gardens in which yew trees were trimmed in fantastic shapes, and every few minutes they swung past a cricket field where white flanneled youths indulged in the national game.

After crossing several of the prettiest counties in England they came at last into the station at Winstut Town, where they descended and found a motor car with a chauffeur awaiting them.

Although it was his first week-end at an English country house, Dick was not disturbed by the coming experience. The development in the United States, first of the motor car, then the airplane, had made residence in town no longer necessary.

The well-to-do lived in their country houses from twenty-five to a hundred miles from the big cities and there entertained in the manner of the British Isles. He did not expect to be impressed; he was impressed, nevertheless, by the grounds and by the Abbey.

The great oaks in the park, hundreds of years old, the stately pile of the Abbey, stately despite the incongruity of its architectural periods, drew from him gasps of admiration.

"There's the old rookery," gibbered Roger. Dick could have murdered him. From that Tudor Manor he expected to emerge men with short cloaks, and long swords, ruffs and ribbons, and ladies in voluminous robes and Elizabethan headdresses.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself to refer to a home like this in such a manner."

"Give me an apartment in town," yawned Roger.

Two or three men servants descended upon them, fawned on them, and burdened themselves with their bags. Roger led the way into the hall, cupped his hands, and shouted.

"Oh, Vesta, guests arriving." His voice echoed in the lofty apartment, wide and long, with more than one suit of armor standing along the walls, and numerous tattered pennants fluttering from the Gothic timbered roof.

Through a great stained glass window at the rear the sunlight came softly tinted and, from a door at the right, a girl came forth and stood in the sunlight which revealed to Dick the most enchanting profile he had ever seen.

She turned toward him instantly and the light rested upon her golden hair like a halo.

"My particular crony, Dick Boswell," announced Roger. "My sister, Vesta."

The astounding loveliness of the

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young woman almost paralyzed the faculties of the youth. Her eyes rested upon him perfunctorily, and then in surprise.

"But surely you—how do you do, Mr. Boswell."

"Er—how do you do?" he stammered.

"You don't look in the least as I expected," she said coldly.

"No? How did you expect me to look?"

"A little more like your reputation," she said acidly.

CHAPTER IV.

THE WALNUT ROOM.

A HORSE laugh from Roger enabled Dick to pull himself together. Under the enchantment of those amazing eyes he had completely forgotten his business here and the rôle which he had so carefully built up for himself for a year and a half.

His idiotic reputation had preceded him and damned him in the estimation of Vesta Tuttle, the loveliest creature upon whom he had ever looked, for whose good opinion he would barter everything—almost everything.

Condemned in advance. And he could do nothing for his redemption. Every move he might make to convince her he was not what he was painted would work against the interest which brought him to this house.

"One on you, Dick, old ninny," guffawed Roger. "The Vestal knows all about you. Did you hear about the time he took the chorus of the 'Girl in Brocade' swimming in the Serpentine?"

"I have heard of several of your merry pranks," said Vesta stiffly, "and kindly don't call me the Vestal, Roger. I have spoken of that before. Mr. Boswell, you are very welcome. Durgin will show you to your room, the walnut room. And should you feel the need of a swimming pool, there is one on the other side of the hangar."

She was all the Lady of the Manor as she dismissed him. Dick, feeling about two inches tall, followed the dignified butler while Roger brought up the rear, still chortling. Dick restrained an impulse to push him downstairs.

They walked a mile, it seemed, along the corridor of the second floor, and then the servant threw open the door of a huge chamber and stepped back to permit the guest to enter.

There was a musty smell in the room, due to decaying furnishings and closed windows, but the butler quickly opened two of them. Dick looked about him whimsically while Roger bellowed again.

"You laughing jackass," Dick exclaimed angrily. "Having queered me with your sister by your idiotic chatter below and had your laugh, I should think you would be satisfied. What's the infernal joke now?"

"My eye," roared Roger, holding his sides. "I didn't do you in with Vesta. You were all cooked and ready for the oven. That's why you got this appalling room."

Dick looked around. There was a huge black walnut bed, a great bureau with marble top, also black walnut, a quartet of walnut chairs upholstered in horsehair. A stuffed bird covered with a glass globe on a huge, crooked-legged, ingeniously carved black walnut table.

"When she doesn't like anybody she puts them in this room," explained Roger. "We hardly ever use this wing of the house, anyway, and there are scores of decent rooms. Sis heard some gossip about you in London and sent you back to good Queen Victoria's days."

"I see," he said forlornly. Then, with a sudden burst of anger:

"Do me a favor, Roger."

"At your service, Mr. Gladstone."

"Get out of here and leave me in peace."

"There's no bathroom here, but go down the hall four doors and you'll find one neatly done in tin," he advised.

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"I'll go down and grab Vesta by the neck and choke a decent room out of her."

"This will do nicely," Dick declared. "If you mention to your sister that I am dissatisfied I'll murder you."

"If you're gone on her, it won't do any good," jeered Roger from the door. "She likes fine, upstanding, worthy citizens."

Left alone Dick relieved his eyes from the horrible spectacle of the chamber by looking out of the window upon one of the finest lawns in all England which terminated several hundred yards distant in a grove of kingly oaks, but he could not so relieve his mind.

As he had shaped his conduct since arriving in London for the purpose of attracting to himself wastrels and nitwits like Roger and to create in the minds of others the opinion that he was a nincompoop and a ne'er-do-well, lifted above the vagabonds only because of his wealth, he had no cause to complain if this Angel of the Abbey viewed him in that light.

Yet she had seemed surprised; she had said that he did not look as she expected. Perhaps if he had half an hour alone with her—and then he remembered the man on the park bench.

"Don't fall in love. Women can see through a man."

"Oh, my God," he groaned. "Let's see how much I can look like an idiot."

He stood before the mirror and practiced expressions, hating each one worse than the last. Finally he shrugged his shoulders, and, dreading to explore the corridor for the bathroom, made his ablutions in cold water at the washstand in the chamber.

A polite knock at the door and the valet entered. He opened Dick's bags and deftly unpacked them, laid out his evening things and waited to assist in the gentleman's toilet. Dick was like most active young Americans, however wealthy, who detest having a man servant fumbling about them, so he dismissed him with half a crown.

He dressed leisurely, it lacking a few moments of six. Finally, in evening attire, he moved slowly along the corridor toward the fine old oak staircase which led down into the grand hall.

A footman at the foot of the stairs bowed with dignity.

"You'll probably wish to join Sir Augustus and the gentlemen in the billiard room, sir," he said. Without waiting for an answer, he led the way to the rear and through a door which opened from the left. Dick found himself in a forty-foot salon called a billiard room only by courtesy since a single billiard table occupied one corner and the remainder of the room was used for lounging and smoking.

"Mr. Richard Boswell," announced the servant.

Five or six men were grouped in a far corner and one of them rose and came forward, Sir Augustus.

"How do you do, Mr. Boswell," he boomed. "I am happy to make your acquaintance. Gentlemen, a friend of my son Roger's. This is Sir Donald Wark"—indicating a tall, languid-looking person with a monocle—"and this is Herr Steinburg." A portly, florid, thick-necked and clean-shaved German bowed from the waist.

Richard recognized in Herr Steinburg the original of a photograph labeled Gottlieb Stutt, and assumed his most vacuous expression.

"Mr. Boswell, permit me to introduce Mr. Ernest Goring, editor of the London *Plane*," continued Sir Augustus. A small, bespectacled and bearded Englishman bowed courteously.

"And M. Vauban," concluded Sir Augustus. Dick identified him from another photograph and the name was not Vauban.

He was inwardly excited: the introduction of two Continental magnates under assumed names was proof that all was not open and above board at Winstut Abbey.

"Now, Roger," purred Sir Augustus, "take your friend under your own

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wing and beat him at billiards if you can, or perhaps he would like to look through the portrait gallery."

With this he turned his back upon Boswell, as did his companions. Roger came forward, tucked his hand in Dick's arm, and led him out of the room and into the hall.

"The guvnor told me I could have you down, but to keep you out of his way," he gurgled. "He's talking business with a lot of bigwigs and we're excess baggage, as you Yankees say."

"I take it your father transacts business on the Continent, Roger," he ventured.

"Lord, yes. Don't know what the old boy intends to do with all the money he's making, but more power to his elbow, say I. He does business everywhere. The world is his oyster and it will give him indigestion some day. But the more lucre he makes the more I get if I'm a good boy. What say if you and I feed ourselves a preliminary cocktail. Slip into this room and I'll ring."

He pushed open a door, exclaimed, "Oh, Lord," and made to withdraw. A clear, crystalline soprano stayed him.

"Come in, Roger," called Vesta. "Bring Mr. Boswell with you."

"We're in for it," he groaned.

They entered a small drawing-room brilliantly lighted and exquisitely furnished. Vesta sat in a big chair beside a tiny table and under a reading lamp which caused her hair to glitter like molten gold.

Roger sneaked in like a criminal, but Dick entered with a joyous smile that drew one to Vesta's beautiful mouth, which she quickly suppressed.

"Just thought we'd slip in here and toss one off," apologized Roger. "The pater sent us into exile. Told me to take him to the picture gallery. That's a good one, what?"

Vesta regarded him balefully. "Suppose you go to the picture gallery by yourself," she suggested. "I would like a word or two with Mr. Boswell."

"None of that now! Dick and I stick together, Damon and Pythias," he expostulated.

"Roger, do as I say."

"Might think she was my mother, the snip. She's only twenty," he growled.

"Very well. Yell if you need help, Dick."

"Sit down, Mr. Boswell, please," she said when Roger had made an undignified exit. "Are you comfortable?"

"Oh, quite," he said, and detected the quiver of a smile at the right side of her mouth.

"You are an older man than Roger," she said sharply. "You look like a man of intelligence and character. You have a strong chin and good eyes."

Dick gasped. This girl was disconcerting as well as distractingly beautiful.

"I first heard of you eight or ten months ago," she said. "You attracted considerable attention in New York, I believe."

He flushed to his ears.

She continued: "A book of your poems happened to fall into my hands. Most of them were so bad it seemed as if you were trying to burlesque certain writers of free verse. One or two were really good."

"You amaze me," he stammered. "I had no notion my poor efforts had reached England."

"I don't imagine you had any circulation here. A girl friend of mine who considers herself a poet got hold of this copy. The next I heard of you, Roger began to talk about you. Apparently you were his most intimate friend."

He tried to think of something stupid to throw this clear-sighted young woman off the course she was following so directly.

"Birds of a feather," he mumbled. She gazed at him intently.

"Upon my word," she ejaculated. "Almost you convince me that you are birds of a feather."

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"Old Roger and I like to do the same things, kick up rough a bit, not too much. Make a stir, you know."

"Like small boys on a school vacation," she sniffed. "Just the same, Mr. Boswell, you don't look the part. I am given to understand you are very wealthy."

"My father has oodles," he said, with an idiot's laugh.

"Roger will inherit the income from a vast estate, but if you are also a rich man you cannot be interested in him from a mercenary standpoint."

"Thanks for so much," he said with a bitterness in his voice which reached her.

"Roger is my brother, but I am not blind to his faults. He has the mind of a twelve-year-old boy."

"He's good company. We like the same things."

"Ladies of the chorus."

"Oh, we're not crazy about them. We like to swim and box and row and play squash."

She brushed back the hair from her forehead with a small white ringless hand then knitted her brow prettily.

"You talk just like him yet you are five or six years older. Don't you think of nothing but playing games? Are you just a child like Roger?"

"Really, Miss Tuttle, you are not complimentary to either of us."

"I'm sorry," she said contritely. "You must think me an amazingly rude person. You see, I expected somebody quite different in appearance from you. There was something about you—but I am afraid you don't follow me."

Hating himself, Dick said blandly, "Roger was saying something about a cocktail—"

Vesta was out of her chair, her eyes blazed for a second, and then she laughed.

"Of course," she said. "Please stay here and I'll send Roger to you. I'll ring the bell and when the servant comes tell him what you require."

"Oh, please, let me go. Don't let me drive you away."

"I have women guests whom I must visit. I was about to leave when you entered."

He opened the door for her and she sailed out, disapproval of him evident in every lovely line of her. He had triumphed, but his triumph agonized him. To think that he must permit this girl to consider him like this.

When the servant entered he said he wished for nothing. He took up the book which she had laid down. It was an American novel. Anyway, she said one or two of his poems were good. He had tucked one or two that he had fancied in among the rubbish he had sent to the publisher and she had found them. What a girl!

CHAPTER V.

TWO AT A PIANO.

ROGER returned a few moments later, curiosity written deeply upon his very open countenance.

"What did she want to say to you, lad?" he demanded.

"She couldn't believe I was as big a fool as you are," he replied nastily. "However, a few minutes' conversation convinced her that alongside of me you are a mental giant."

"Old Vesta's all right," soothed Roger, "but she fancies herself. Considers that she inherited all of father's skull machinery and she nags me. As I'm her brother I have to stand for it, but you tell her what's what. Don't mind my feelings. Pitch into her. I'm going to be very sorry for the chap that marries the Vestal. My word, yes."

"Oh, rot," growled Dick. "Tell me something about the Abbey."

"Never was an Abbey," replied the heir. "There was an old monastery on the spot, but Henry VIII hung the abbot and razed the Abbey. He gave the estate to a beezer named Winstut, who was a great one for bursting into

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convents and annoying the nuns, and he hung more monks who wouldn't join the new church than any man in England.

"He built this part of the house. Imitated the architecture of the old Abbey a trifle. His descendants did well for themselves for a couple of hundred years, but began to go broke about 1900, and the war polished them off.

"Along came the paternal ancestor and bought the place for nothing or thereabouts and founded a new dynasty. He'll probably be made a baron in a year or two and he's likely to die a duke. Pretty nifty for young Roger. Roger Duke of Whatchumaycallum."

"You'll make a tolerable duke," grinned Dick. "At least you will realize the American conception of an English duke."

"Perfectly elegant ass, what?" replied Roger with unexpected acumen. "You can't pull my leg, old boy. And now for the liquid fire."

There assembled in the great drawing-room at seven thirty nearly a score of guests. Sir Donald Wark and Ernest Goring had come with their wives; Lady Cora Droom had brought her husband, a meek, wistful old young man, four inches shorter and thirty pounds lighter than his robust spouse.

There was a small, anæmic blond woman of middle age, Miss Purrington, who was allotted to the tender mercies of Mr. Steinburg as a dinner partner; and a boisterous buxom widow, Mrs. Loring, who was assigned to the Frenchman.

For Roger, Vesta had invited a very pretty brunette, a school friend. She was the daughter of a Belgian orphan girl, who had been adopted in 1915 by a Manchester manufacturer's wife, and who had married a wealthy draper.

The girl had Gallic vivacity and French eyes and English notions of propriety and decorum. Vesta would have liked Roger to fall in love with her.

To Dick befell a plump woman incredibly wrinkled of face, evidently of advanced age, despite the fact that her scanty hair was dyed bright yellow. Her upper teeth were false, and she sprayed when she talked, through no fault of her own, but for this reason. Unfortunately she was very talkative.

Vesta, in a yellow silk evening dress which matched her hair, sufficiently décolleté to reveal an exquisite bosom, gave her arm to Sir Herbert Droom, while Sir Augustus took in Lady Cora. In the long, voluminous skirts of 1940 Vesta seemed to glide rather than walk. No longer was a casual male permitted to know the contour of a lady's limb, and once again women were in mortal fear of a mouse.

They moved majestically into a Tudor refectory and took their places about a long, wide table groaning under the weight of the family silver, glittering with roses strewn on the white cloth like blood on the snow, and electric lamps disguised as candles. The butler, aided by four footmen in the red and gold livery of Sir Augustus, served a heavy repast of many courses.

Conversation was subdued and decorous. It seemed to Dick it would be a sacrilege to laugh. Vesta was so far up on the other side of the table that he could not see much of her, particularly as a great Italian silver salt cellar blocked his view.

His own dinner partner persisted in talking about America, betraying an ignorance so absymal that he had not the heart to begin to correct her errors. Roger made sympathetic signs to him, and seemed to be disinterested in the pretty Belgo-British girl by his side.

Sir Augustus occasionally addressed a heavily jocose remark to some one well down the table, but usually talked in low tones to the lady at his side. Once he heard Vesta's musical laugh, and was annoyed to think that her partner might be amusing her.

There were excellent wines, sauterne with the fish, claret with the roast,

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champagne with the entrée; but the entire company, except Roger, partook sparingly. At dessert Roger was talking loudly, ignoring warning signals from Vesta and drawing ominous looks from his father.

Dick consulted his wrist watch from time to time and found that it had taken an hour and a half to progress from soup to cheese. The ladies rose at a signal from Vesta, the men rose likewise and toasted them silently, then resumed their chairs when the women had retired for coffee to the drawing-room.

In five minutes, however, the men were ready to follow. Gone were the days when British gentlemen sat the entire evening at table consuming heavy port.

Two bridge tables were formed, several men and women went off to play billiards. Sir Augustus drew off the German, the Frenchman, and his editor-in-chief to his own private sitting room for the balance of the evening.

Dick had avoided bridge because he wished to be free to cope with any eventuality in regard to his mission. The dark girl lured Roger to a nook, and the American found himself, to his dismay, and also his delight, left in the drawing-room with Vesta, who had also refused to play bridge.

It was his business to offer attention to his hostess, and he strolled to her side.

"It must be very tedious for you the sort of evenings we spend in the country," she said significantly. "Roger is always bored to death, and you profess to be a bird of his feather."

He dropped into a chair beside her. "It has its compensations," he said. "I think it very pleasant."

"Really. Do you like music?"

"In reasonable doses."

"Would you like me to play?"

"I can think of nothing more enchanting."

She laughed. "You have not heard me play. I am a rank amateur."

He laughed. "I venture to doubt that."

Vesta lifted beautiful eyebrows and there was amusement dancing in her eyes.

"You are not half bad," she admitted. "Pretty speeches are quite out of Roger's line."

"After all, I lived quite awhile before I encountered Roger."

"But what a life," she sighed with mock pity. "Very well. I'll play a little."

He escorted her to the grand piano at the far corner of the huge room, drew up the piano chair, and seated her. Her slender white fingers touched the keys and drifted into Debussy's "Clair de Lune." He had been right: she was not an amateur. He listened to the exquisite music, which suggested drops of water splashing on a pool; the room faded and they seemed walking in a garden under a warm crescent of silver.

Perhaps she preferred to amuse herself at the piano to exchanging banter with a man whom she did not respect, but whom convention required that she treat with courtesy. Or perhaps she sensed his understanding and appreciation of the music of a composer almost forgotten in 1940.

She drifted from one of his quaint, exotic piano pieces to another, while Dick listened spellbound. Forgotten was his mission, the danger which threatened his country, his long period of training for this entrée. He was leaning upon the piano top gazing at the most exquisite woman in the world, whose magic fingers were transfiguring the universe.

Meanwhile in the private sitting room of Sir Augustus four men sat around a table while there was spread out before them a map of the United States. The German was speaking in fluent and faultless English.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

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Emergency Rations

A story of the war in which pigeons hover perilously between pie and communication duty

By WILLIAM E. OLIVER

CORPORAL STEVE SNELLY thought he was the hardest-boiled bird in the regiment. He was well cast for the rôle. An inch over six feet, he was built like an armored car, red of hair, with a cauliflower ear that turned blood red when he was angry.

His fists made a corporal out of him. From then on he used them to make soldiers out of any squad that came under his command. But he was too busy being a bad man to worry much about the comforts of his men. Few dared, however, to complain.

Pigeons brought about the downfall of Corporal Steve Snelly. That is, with the aid of a little sawed-off and knocked down runt from the second battalion. Here is how it happened.

Maybe adjutants like to play poker with the regimental personal cards. Anyway, one day the card of Corporal Snelly was dragged from the files and thrown to a clerk along with another card which gave the information that Ira Hall, private first class, serial number 206789, was born in Chicago, Illinois.

When he enlisted for the duration of the war he was twenty-two years old and by occupation a cook. He had

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blue eyes, light yellow hair, fair complexion and stood five feet four inches in his socks.

Not a very convincing description for the Nemesis of a bad man. But army records, you have to take them or leave them.

One item, however, the records didn't show. Private Hall, in addition to his civilian experience as a cook, was fond of pets.

He was always salvaging mongrels along the line of march. Once he had a family of pink-eyed mice until the division went from training into the Vosges trenches. Then they disappeared.

There were too many dugout rats. Hall's blue eyes watered for days after the demise of the mice.

But these same eyes could tighten into steel pin points on occasions. Let some one mistreat his pets. "Shorty" Hall became a bantam weight fury with a stick of dynamite in each fist.

The Vesuvius slept so long, however, that few suspected it. Corporal Snelly was not among the few.

But this is no fight story. It's about pigeons. So some time after the two cards were taken from the personal files at regimental headquarters, a notice appeared on Company F's bulletin board:

September 10, 1918.
ORDER NO. 132.

1. The following men will report following retreat for special duty:
Corporal S. Snelly
Private 1st Cl. I. Hall

2. These men will be prepared to leave for pigeon signal school to-night.

A. F. ARMSTRONG
Commanding Officer.

Shorty Hall was coming off latrine detail when he saw the notice. All day he had been wondering what he could adopt for his next pet. He had tried everything from next size to a cootie up to next size to an army mule.

The notion of trapping a French cuckoo had occurred to him. It might be trained to sing "cuckoo" to the officers and get away with it. So when Shorty saw his name on the bulletin board, he almost dropped his honey spade with joy.

The company coming off retreat crowded after him to the bulletin board. The second platoon began to whoop when they saw the corporal's name.

The self-styled man crusher detailed to hostle pigeons! Wowie! Snelly, the bruiser, chief of the pigeoneers!

The second platoon had felt the weight of his fists and the lash of his foul tongue. Sweet revenge. The news spread as rapidly as a latrine rumor of a leave to Paris.

Big Sherman, the ward politician from Chicago, suggested a reception for the comrade so signally honored.

"Youse birds has got to show our dear corporal," he announced, "how proud we are over his promotion."

Shorty, happy over the new twist to his war destiny, met the corporal in the château yard where the company was billeted. His blue eyes shone.

"Say, corporal," he said proudly, "did you hear the good news about me and you?"

Snelly scowled at the "me and you." "I" was the only pronoun he knew.

"What yuh babbling about, soldier?" he grunted.

Hall pointed in the direction of the bulletin board and elucidated.

"Me and you have been picked for pigeon signalmen. We leave to-night for the school."

"Say, soldier, if this is your bum idea of a razz, I'm going to slap you so hard you'll break off at the ankles," growled the corporal.

"Honest, Snelly," answered Hall. "It's on the bulletin board."

"Get out of my way," grunted Snelly, as he rushed to the bulletin board. His push sent Shorty skidding into a puddle seeping from the stable pile.

The crowd saw the man eater coming, and fell away cautiously. Snelly

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stared at the sheet in angry amazement, his cauliflower ear slowly turning red.

Some one was going to suffer. He, Corporal Snelly, the best fighting man in the regiment, ordered to school to learn to fly measly pigeons!

He glared at the others. "Any of you guys feel like snickering? Because if you do I'll—"

A noise of flapping wings came from behind his back. He swung around and looked into Sherman's innocent face.

The big Chicagoan was rolling a cigarette. Snelly lowered his fist.

From the other side of the crowd came a soft cooing. The corporal whirled again. All faces were blank.

"You birds lay off the razzberry stuff," the corporal threatened, "or I'll take some of you apart and scatter the works."

Sherman stepped up to the irate non com.

"Congratulations, corp," he grinned as he held out a hand, which was ignored. "We birds of Company F is sure proud that our hard-boiled corporal has been see-lected for the flying corpse."

He brought out a pair of pigeon's wings and pinned them deftly on Snelly's blouse, stepped back to safety, and saluted.

The corporal tore off the offending feathers and hurled them to the ground.

"Hell," he snarled, "some day I'll hit you so hard you'll have to be dug six feet out of the ground." He turned and jabbed out a way with his elbows.

Two hours later, as the sun set along the winding road that led from Ailly, two soldiers were marching. They were Corporal Steve Snelly and Private Shorty Hall *en route* to the pigeon school.

The bigger man halted at a bend in the highway, took off his rifle, helmet and pack, and hung them on the little man's shoulder. Then he rolled a cigarette and strolled on.

"Hey, what's the big idea?" balked Shorty. "Ain't I got enough with my own equipment?"

"Sew up your lip, you runt," bullied the other. "You're in training. Because if there's going to be any pigeon toting, by heck, you're going to do it."

Shorty humped his shoulders and plodded after him.

II.

FOURTEEN days later Company F was clinging to a string of shell holes in the Argonne drive at the head of a narrow ravine which ran up into a German stronghold plateau tangled with underbrush and thick with machine guns.

Captain Armstrong had just received orders to hang on.

"We've got to hold this valley head," he said calmly, with the grim ghost of a smile, "if it takes every man down to the cooks."

"My platoon has had nothing to eat for thirty-eight hours," put in a lieutenant.

"What the hell did you come up here for? For a picnic? Get back and see that your men don't waste ammunition. God knows when the swivel chair strategists back there will send up relief." The captain's voice softened. "Make the wounded as comfortable as possible. I'm trying to get word through to the regiment for ambulances, ammunition and rations."

A signal sergeant came down the steps to the P. C.

"Battalion wire shot up again," he snapped. "Barrage on the left busted it in a million places. Can't get through to battalion, sir, on account of machine gun fire."

The captain was troubled. He consulted his map and scribbled a message. "You'll have to get through down the valley to regimental headquarters. Here's an order for artillery support and supplies. Get a detail and start right away."

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The sergeant buttoned the message in his left breast pocket and crawled up the steps.

A freight car came wabbling over the hills and roared down into the valley. It landed with an earth shaking *cru-ump*.

A geyser of mud, bricks and earth rose in the air and fell again like a fountain. As the last brick came thudding down, two figures, half buried by débris in a near-by shell hole, untangled themselves and climbed out. They were Corporal Snelly and Private Hall, pigeoneers of Company F.

Shorty shook himself like a terrier. He was carrying two packs and two rifles, and from his shoulder hung a cloth-covered basket.

"What's the idea of trying to ram that damn basket of pigeons in my eye?" asked the corporal as he recovered his breath.

"You ain't got a deed to every shell hole in France!" indignantly retorted Shorty. "Them pigeons got to be protected same as you."

"To hell with them pigeons. I wish the biggest gun Fritzie ever made was firing the biggest shell the world ever seen right this minute, and it was going to light on you and blow you and them damn squabs into hamburger!"

"Is that so?" answered the other. "Well, I wish you was a whole regiment and you was hopping over, with a thousand machine guns popping hell out of you!"

"Listen," snarled Snelly, "if you don't learn how to talk back proper to a non com, I'll send you back in separate pieces to fifty different field hospitals." He started up the valley once more. "When we find our outfit again, I'll prefer charges against you for insubordination."

"When we find 'em," retorted the other, stumbling after.

"If you hadn't stopped to feed them damn pigeons every two hours, we'd have found them two days ago."

"Guess the outfit is real pining to see its corporal pigeoneer," said Shorty innocently.

"Any guy makes a crack about pigeons is going to wake up smelling ether," retorted the other.

The two stumbled on in silence, Shorty staggering after the corporal under his heavy load.

As they climbed around a shattered clump of what had been trees they ran into the signal sergeant and his detail.

"Where the hell you guys been?" asked the non com. "You was supposed to report back from school ten days ago."

"We got lost, sergeant," said Snelly. "An M. P. put us on the wrong road and headed us for San Mee-yell."

"Well, you'd better alley toot sweet up the valley and report in. Looks like there's going to be hell popping for Company F before long," the other barked. "Any shell fire back down the valley?"

"Shell fire!" replied the corporal. "Them damn whiz bang sharpshooters has been making us do the sailor's hornpipe for the last two miles."

"Looks like a nice detail getting down through that mess," the sergeant said anxiously.

He started on again, followed by his detail.

Snelly watched them disappear.

"Did you hear him say there's going to be hell popping up there with Company F?" he said.

"I'm 'way ahead of you, corp," the other replied.

"What d'you mean?" asked Snelly.

"Let's bivvey down in that old mill over there until it's over," explained Shorty, pointing to a ruined flour mill ahead of them in the valley. "There ain't no hurry in winning this war."

"Soldier, you're learning," replied Snelly, leading the way to a hole in a wall which marked the site of a flour mill used for grinding wheat grown behind the German lines.

Halfway to the ruin a sky-tearing shriek ripped down the valley. The

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pigeoneers covered the last twenty yards to the hole at a sprint.

The hole led into a cellar, and as they entered a horde of gray shapes with fire-pointed ears darted past them with frightened squeals and scurried down the holes which honeycombed the ground outside.

"Ugh," shivered Snelly. "Rats."

"Rats or no rats," said Shorty, "they're better company than whiz bangs and freight cars."

He unslung the basket and hung it carefully from a wire on a beam, crooning soothingly to the pigeons.

"By the eternal," growled the corporal. "You pack them squabs around like you do it for pleasure. Pigeoneers!" he added. "A hell of a detail for a first-class fighting man like me, Corporal Steve Snelly, what can lick any two men in the regiment."

He dropped his bulk wearily on a battered couch in the cellar and announced his intention of sleeping off his misery.

Shorty, left to himself, reconnoitered. His eyes gleamed as they fell on a large rat trap.

He climbed up the broken ladder into the mill room. There were heaps of spoiled grain scattered around. In a bin lay sacks of flour left in panic by the German soldier-millers.

He went below. An excited flutter met his ear. The rats were swarming on the beams, trying to get down the wire to the pigeons. He threw a brick, and they fled, squealing.

With a gleaming look, he picked up the trap, rummaged in his pack for a piece of bacon fat, and set the trap outside the door near the holes, where he could watch it.

III.

WHEN the corporal woke up two hours later, the valley outside was unearthly quiet. From the far distance came the chatter of machine guns and the dull crashing of shells. Without was a cawing sound and the flap of wings.

He went outside and found Shorty sitting in the doorway, his eyes fixed on the box trap near the holes. A dozen gray forms lay on a board near the private.

Shorty pointed to the trap and motioned the corporal to keep quiet.

Two black crows were waddling gravely around the trap eying the piece of bacon fat inside it. One of them was about to walk inside, when Snelly said:

"What the hell's the idea? Starting a menagerie?"

The crows flapped up into the trees to join their comrades. Shorty swore.

"Ain't you got no tact, Snelly?" he demanded. "Just when I was getting a playmate for my pigeons."

"To hell with the pigeons," said the corporal. "When do we eat?"

"There's a bunch of flour up on that other floor. Make yourself some flapjacks," suggested Hall. "Or go roll yourself a dead Fritz for some swartzen brot and liverwurst."

Snelly scowled at him and slumped down in the doorway. His hand slithered over the dead rats. He shuddered.

"What's the idea of leaving dead rats all over the joint?" he wanted to know.

"Aw, take a flying jump at yourself," retorted his comrade. "Guess I can catch a few rats without the corporal's permission."

"You'd better police 'em up," said Snelly, retiring into the cellar again.

Shorty set the trap once more and followed him in. The non com was sitting with his eyes fixed on the basket of pigeons.

"Did I hear you say there's a bunch of flour up there?" he asked.

"Sure, sacks of it."

"Say, Hall," went on the corporal, his eyes on the pigeons again, "what's to prevent them pigeons being left outside and getting hit by a shell?"

"Chiefly me," answered Shorty.

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"Them birds is going to get the best of care."

"You and me ain't drawn regular rations for ten days, and if the army ain't going to feed us we ain't going to lug them damn squabs all over France for fun, are we?"

"Let me worry about that detail," said Shorty. "I don't mind toting 'em around."

"Like hell you will!" The corporal's tone became harsh. "I'm in charge here, and my orders is that we eat pigeon pie."

Shorty laughed. "What do you think the outfit's going to say if them birds is missing?"

"D'yah think I'm going to let that bunch keep razzing me about them squabs? Them pigeons is going to be missing in action toot sweet."

He advanced to the basket.

With a desperate look, Shorty blocked his way.

"Listen, corp," he pleaded. "You wouldn't hurt the little cusses. They came up with us through all that shell-fire and gas. Let's turn 'em loose and give 'em a chanst."

"Not while my stomach is flapping in the breeze. Them birds is going to be mulligan in about fifteen minutes."

Snelly reached for the basket.

Shorty barred his way.

"Keep your hands off them birds," he said with deadly calm.

The corporal's cauliflower ear turned a dull red.

"Get out of my way before I mash you."

"I got a bargain, Snelly," said Shorty desperately. "I'll fight you for them birds. I know you'll laugh. Take off them stripes. I'll fight you. If I win, they go free; if you win, they're yours, and I won't squawk."

Snelly's rage turned to amazement, as his mouth opened with a roar.

"You're on," he sneered. "I'll poke you so hard the war'll be over six months before you come to."

"Outside, where there's plenty of room," said the other, peeling off his blouse. "I've been wanting to poke you ever since I first saw your mug."

"You'll need to go outside. You've got a lot of lying down to do," the corporal remarked as he tore off his blouse.

The two faced each other in the clearing. From the distance came the dull crash of shells and the heavy rattle of machine guns. Over them in the trees the crows cawed to each other excitedly.

The private threw himself into a crouching position, waiting for the other's bull-like rush. His blue eyes were steelpoints of fury.

The corporal walked into the other with easy assurance. But Shorty, with a catlike movement, slipped under his guard and jabbed two stiff blows at the other's stomach.

Snelly grunted and snarled with pain. He swung around and started after him, his right hanging back for a lightninglike smash.

The lighter man danced out of his way, slipped past him and jabbed in two more stinging blows. Snelly's self-confident grin turned to a scowl. He bent over and began to stalk his man.

Shorty danced in again to deliver lightninglike smashes.

Suddenly a stone wall rose up and hit him with a numbing crash. It was the corporal's right.

The little man staggered, his cheek bone laid open. Stung to fury, he rushed at his enemy in a mad, unreasoning hate. His charge carried him under the corporal's guard, and he opened up the other's eyebrow.

Snelly threw his arms around the other with a bellow and tried to smash him down, one fist pounding his unguarded face.

The other's senses reeled under the punishment. But he thought of the pigeons. With a snakelike squirm he tore himself away.

Both men had slipped back into primal being, blood lusting. Every-

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thing was forgotten but the will to batter each other down. A shell exploded near by; but they fought on, unheeding the fragments of steel that sang around them.

As the corporal backed away under the sudden fury of Shorty's mad onslaught, his heel caught in a block of stone. He fell, catching himself on his hands.

The other stepped back, forgetting for a fateful second the law of the jungle, to give the other no chance.

Snelly rose warily, his right hand hanging as though sprained. Shorty leaped in to finish him. The same numbing wall crashed into him again as one hundred and ninety pounds of beef and bone triphammered him behind the corporal's fist.

Shorty shook his head dazedly and fell on his hands and knees. He staggered to his feet. Then he fell backward and the world went black in a blaze of pain.

When he came to, his head was in a pool of water on the cellar floor. Snelly was pouring a canteen over him. He twisted around to look for the basket of pigeons. It still hung on the beam. Snelly grinned cruelly.

"Don't worry," he said. "Them damn squabs is safe. Don't think I'm going to do the dirty work. That training you had as a cook before you got in the army is going to be right handy. You're going to get some of the flour from up there and bake a swell little pigeon pie for your corporal in that stove the Fritzies left in the corner."

Shorty got to his feet with a groan.

"Take them birds outside and pluck 'em. Then you can bake a pie in this mess kit, private," went on the corporal ruthlessly.

"Have a heart, Snelly," said the other. "I can't kill the little cusses."

"It's your own bargain, soldier. Get busy; I'm hungry."

Shorty took the mess kit and went to the open doorway. Suddenly he became acquiescent.

"You win, but I hope you choke to death."

"Bury the feathers, and everything. Them birds has got to be missing in action. Get me?" the corporal ordered.

As Shorty took down the basket, the pigeons cooed under his touch. He winced.

"While you're policing around," ordered the non com, "take them damn rats you caught and bury them, too. They give me the willies."

Shorty's eyes gleamed. He crooned to his pets a moment and started outside. Snelly seemed touched.

"Guess it's a dirty trick, Hall," he offered. "Let me take 'em out and bump 'em off."

"No, I guess I can stand it," interposed the other. "It's a bargain. You licked me."

"All right. Shake the lead out of your pants" said Snelly, dropping onto the couch. "I'm going to hit the hay. Call me when dinner is servey, garsong."

Shorty went outside with the basket of pigeons and the ghost of a desperate grin on his face. He stepped over the dead rats near the doorway and paused. Then he looked back into the cellar.

The corporal was already snoring. He walked softly around the corner of the mill, and after a few minutes returned without the basket.

After a look in at the snoring corporal, he climbed to the upper floor and brought down a mess kit full of flour. With a cautious glance through the doorway, he went to the box trap and chased away two impudent black crows pecking throught the bars at the piece of bacon.

Shorty picked up the trap and then started to work, humming under his breath.

IV.

COMPANY F was in dire straits. The sergeant and his detail failed to break

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through the cordon of shellfire at the lower end of the valley, and came back with two men missing. The news brought a grim look to the captain's face.

The enemy had filtered in on either side of them. Frantic ground signals and smoke bombs had been made to send the word to contact planes. But the mists were heavy on the ground, and the calls for help were unanswered.

The third platoon lieutenant crawled over and reported his Chaut-Chauts out of ammunition.

"I wish some of those swivel chair generals were up here," he groaned. "They wouldn't be so anxious to leave men in a death trap without support."

A runner came tumbling down the dugout steps, his left arm limp and dripping.

"Captain," he gasped, "they've worked in behind us at the bottom end of the valley with machine guns and mortars. They're coming up the valley. I left Simpson falling back slowly to give me time to get here."

"Good God!" blurted out the captain. "So that's why they boxed the lower end of the valley with shell fire. To keep out reserves. They've got us cut off. We've got to get word through or we're lost."

The signal sergeant broke in. "What's become of the pigeon detail, sir? We met them coming up with the pigeons," he said eagerly. "If we can find them we've got a chance."

"Send out a man to each platoon to locate them," the captain ordered hurriedly. "If they once got in this damn valley they must be still here. Rush men out right away, sergeant."

The sergeant saluted and dashed away.

V.

BELOW the company trenches, in the cellar of the mill, Corporal Snelly was sitting with a beatific smile on his battered countenance, finishing the last of the pie.

"Hot patootie," he gurgled. "If I only had a canteen of good ole coney-ac to wash this down."

Private Hall stood morosely near the doorway.

"Hall," announced Snelly, fulsomely, "you're a good pigeoneer, but a damn sight sweller cook. Here, take a bite, just to show there's no hard feelings."

Shorty shook his head. "Eat it yourself. I hope it gives you indigestion for the rest of your life."

"Well, I gave you a chance. It's no skin off my beak if you turn it down," said the other, wolfing down the last hunk of pie.

There was the sound of heavy feet and voices outside. A figure loomed in the doorway, the figure of the signal sergeant.

"Hey, you birds! What the hell you doing in here?" he rasped.

Snelly gulped, and wiped his mouth as the sergeant climbed into the cellar, followed by his men.

"So this is how you guys fight the war?" he burst out.

Snelly cringed. "We couldn't find the outfit, so we dug in here."

"Where the hell are them pigeons?" demanded the sergeant.

"What pigeons?" asked Snelly, innocently.

"Snap out of it. The carrier pigeons you guys were toting up here for the company."

"Oh, them," said the corporal with a nervous grin. "What d'you want 'em for?"

"What for, you dumb-bell!" howled the non com. "Why, the company's cut off — surrounded. Fritzie's down the valley behind us. We need them birds to get word to division headquarters. Do you get that, unconscious? Cough up them birds or you'll spend the rest of your life in a prison camp."

Snelly gulped and looked at Shorty.

"I can't cough 'em up," he faltered. "They—they're missing in action."

"Missing in action?" roared the

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other. "Say, come into the juggling act and produce the pigeons before you start in pushing daisies."

"We ain't got 'em," said Snelly. "Basket got hit by a shell coming up the valley, and them birds was scattered. Ain't that so, Hall?"

Shorty hesitated, then caught Snelly's eye and nodded. The sergeant's eye was cold with suspicion.

"Corporal, you're responsible for them birds, and there's something goofy about this. You can tell it to the captain. Grab your junk and forward march out of here. Shake it up."

As the detail marched off the stacatto bark of machine guns came up the valley from behind them.

Captain Armstrong looked searchingly into Corporal Snelly's evasive face when the detail reached the P. C. dugout. He knew the corporal was lying.

"You've got the unholy gall to tell me those pigeons are missing in action, corporal?" he asked.

"I was firing at a sniper, sir, and a whiz bang whammed over. When I looked around, the basket of pigeons was gone, sir," lied Snelly.

"Well, that kills our last hope of sending for help," said the captain in a deadly quiet voice. "Take these men away, sergeant, and put them under guard. If we ever get out of this alive I'll hold court-martial."

As the two were marched away toward an inner cell in the dugout, a platoon lieutenant burst in. He spoke rapidly.

"Captain, the enemy is attacking our rear. They've almost reached the old mill down below our positions, sir."

The sudden news produced a startling reaction in Shorty. He glared around like a trapped animal a moment. Then he dropped to his feet, rolled between the guards and darted up the dugout steps, leaving a shouting hornet's nest behind him.

Without stopping to take cover from a machine gun barrage whining over his head, he shot down the valley toward the old mill.

The cracking of rifle fire below told of a fierce fighting. He saw the flash of field gray uniforms in the trees near the mill.

He passed a squad of riflemen lying in a shell hole, their Springfields pouring bullets at the massing enemy. They shouted in amazement. But he dashed past unhearing, his eyes fixed on the mill.

A searing pain stabbed his shoulder. But he stumbled on, fixing his bayonet. A pot-helmeted figure rose and fired point-blank at him from a clump of bushes.

Without checking his pace, he gave it the long point and jerked the bayonet out wet. With sobbing breath he dashed into the clearing near the cellar door, the air around him humming with steel.

He disappeared behind the wall at the rear of the mill and reappeared with the pigeon basket on his shoulder. With a quick glance around him he started back for the top of the hill again.

A squad of German riflemen poured around the corner. They stopped with grunts of amazement as the sawed-off American came charging with leveled bayonet.

One of them threw his gun to shoulder. Shorty fired from the hip. The big German crumpled.

He fired again, and another spun around and slumped against the wall, his rifle clattering on the rocks. With a lunge, the American took another in the pit of the stomach.

The rest, falling over each other, tumbled back into the cover of the bushes. With a mad light in his eyes, Shorty plunged on up the valley, his bayonet dripping red.

Captain Armstrong was shouting quick orders to the remnant of his command for a final desperate stand

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when the little pigeoneer came staggering up, his breath sobbing wildly.

The captain stared in amazement. Shorty saluted, unslung the basket and handed it to the captain.

"Pigeoneer Hall, sir, reports to the captain with Company F's carrier pigeons all present and accounted for," he gasped proudly.

The captain looked from him to the basket.

"I thought these birds were lost in action," he said.

"Pigeoneer Hall reports they was lost in action, sir, but now they is found," came the gasping reply.

The captain jerked open the little door at the top of the basket. He looked up with shining eyes.

"By God, we've got a fighting chance, men," he shouted. "Quick, Lieutenant Moore, take a squad down below and hold those gray devils back until these pigeons get through to headquarters. The rest of you platoon commanders keep up a stiff fire on all fronts."

He scribbled hurriedly on the thin tissue paper. Shorty reached into the basket for one of his pets. He stroked it gently as it cooed.

He took the aluminium tube from its leg. The captain rolled the message into a thin cylinder and slipped it into the tube. Shorty clamped the tube on the bird's leg again, and hurled the bird into the air.

The pigeon rose in a wide spiral until it was two hundred feet high. Then it caught its direction and shot like a gray arrow high over the valley straight back in the direction of Vauqois. A second plea for help was slipped into the thin tube as another gray arrow sped away.

The beleaguered company anxiously watched the winged messengers fade from sight, praying that the eagle eyes of German sharpshooters would not bring them down.

The captain turned to his men.

"If any of you feel like praying, hop to it. But, by God, fighting is what counts now." He put his hand on Shorty. "Corporal Hall, you'd better get under cover and stay there. We've got a few good riflemen left, but only one real pigeoneer."

With his basket on his shoulder and his heart light with pride, Company F's new corporal swaggered back to the shelter of the dugout.

The menacing gray of the enemy came nearer. With fire pouring in from all sides, the company made its last stand, asking no quarter, determined not to surrender the soil won at the cost of American blood.

Inch by inch the thin, olive drab cordon tightened. The outposts fell back from shell hole to shell hole with thinning ranks. Suddenly a rifleman looked up and pointed with a whoop of joy.

A group of black dots were growing out of the sky from the southwest. Soon they resolved themselves into the wasplike shapes of contact planes.

Through the yellow puffs of the antiaircraft shells they dodged, and came zooming down over the surrounded company, the observers waving encouragement as they began signaling back to the artillery in the rear.

Soon the shrill moan of shells came tearing out of the distance. The air filled with a solid parabola of screaming steel from American guns.

On all sides fell the storm of death, but the fire-swept circle where the Americans lay besieged was left untouched.

Shattering sounds among the trees where the German infantry was massed told of red havoc there. The gray began to fade out of the green. Down the valley, in the direction from which it had come, the enemy retreated as the barrage cut it to pieces.

A battalion held in reserve down below the hills came hurling forward to the rescue. Their fire took the enemy in the rear. Yells of triumph could be heard coming faintly up to the anxious men on the hill.

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Soon the survivors of Company F were pumping bullets into the fleeing ranks of their attackers, Springfields smoking hot. The cheers of the rescuers became louder. Company F answered with whoops of joy.

Deep down in the dugout, under strong guard, Corporal Snelly sat despondently. He heard the sudden yelling outside and asked what it meant.

"Hell, that's the third battalion coming to relieve us," some one shouted. "Corporal Hall found the pigeons and got a message through to headquarters. Some pigeoneer, that guy!"

"Corporal Hall?" said Snelly, in a daze. "Corporal? And did you say pigeons? There ain't no pigeons, soldier. They's missing in action."

"So's your brains," retorted his informer. "I seed Shorty take them birds out of the basket with my own eyes."

"Then what the hell did he feed me in that pie?" yelled Snelly.

A sudden suspicion crossed his mind. He thought of the rats caught in the trap, the rats he ordered policed up. They had disappeared just before the pie was made.

He uttered a yell. A spasm seized his stomach. He felt sick.

"I'm poisoned," he howled, dropping on the floor. "I've been fed rats. Bring the ambulance. I'm dying. Oh, Lord, doctor, I'm poisoned."

The guard dashed to report Snelly was shell shocked.

Outside, the ragged leavings of the company were greeting the grinning third battalion. Relieving troops were pursuing the surprised enemy over the high plateau, driving them down into the further valley.

Out of the dugout came Snelly, supported by two soldiers, his hands clutching his stomach.

He was moaning. "I've been poisoned. Take me to the hospital. I've eaten rats."

He collapsed, and the stretcher bearers rolled him on to a litter. Corporal Snelly, bad man and champion bruiser, a hulk of blubbering sickness, was being carried to the rear.

Sherman, his face streaked with blood and powder smoke, found Shorty Hall sitting in a shell hole, his pigeon basket still hanging on his shoulder

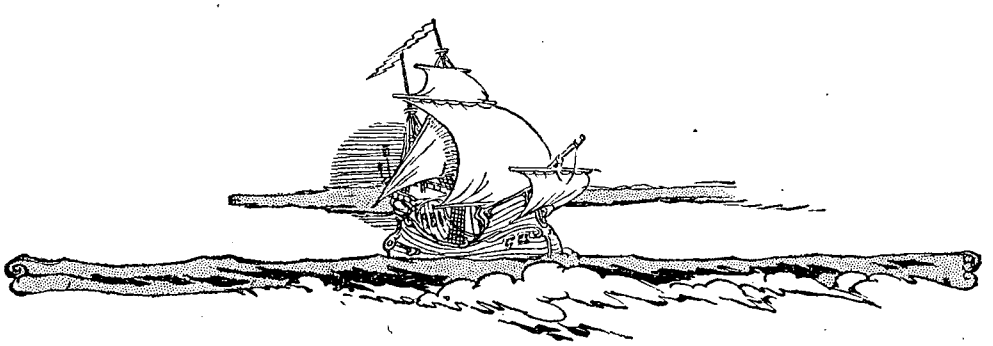
"Say, corporal," he said, "Snelly claims he's poisoned with trench rats you fed him in a pie. That's a dirty trick to play on a guy."

"Rats! That guy's so cuckoo he'd make a swell Swiss clock," grinned Shorty. "I didn't feed him rats. Look!"

He opened the pigeon basket. Sherman looked in. He saw a pair of black crows.

"I caught a hull flock of 'em for mascots down there at the mill in case I had to use the pigeons. I sure hated to bump 'em off just to feed that big sap. But I had to save them pigeons for the captain. Say, Sherman, these crows ought to make swell mascots—"

THE END



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The Last Thousand Miles

He entered the transcontinental foot-race as a lark; but opposition by his best friends made him mad enough to run his hardest

By JOHN HOLDEN

Author of "Marathon Glory," "The Clock That Struck Thirteen," etc.

Novelette—Complete

WITH a shrug of his athletic shoulders and a sigh of regret Jim Gordon laid on the pawnbroker's counter the last of the gold medals he had won in amateur foot races at college, and asked what he could borrow on it.

The pawnbroker examined it.

"Gold plated," he pronounced. "The people who get you amateurs to run for them are not such fools as to give solid gold medals. Plenty of gold they collect from the thousands of spectators who pay to watch you fellows, but when it comes to giving out gold—hah! Fine business. Better than pawnbroking. Big take and little give. This medal, now, I can lend on it—one dollar and fifty cents."

The young college graduate was not surprised. A dozen similar medals he had pawned, and not one had brought him more than two dollars. This one represented a championship into which he had put more preparation and effort than many men put into the winning of a fortune; but that made no difference.

"I'll take it," he said.

The pawnbroker handed him the wherewithal to stave off starvation for awhile, and added a piece of advice:

"If you must run like a horse, young man, do it for money. That's all that counts nowadays. The cheers of the crowd—fine while they last, but soon they are for some one else, and you can starve for all anybody cares."

Out on the street of the Pacific Coast metropolis again, Jim Gordon walked to the nearest restaurant, and there expended one-third of his capital on a meal, after which he sat in a little park, cogitating.

"Licked," he admitted. "Came here to get a foothold, and haven't done it. Got to go back home, I suppose."

There had been a job or two that he could have secured, but he had scorned them. Dishwashing and waiting on table were not for him, though he knew that there were hundreds of men in the overcrowded California city who would have welcomed even such humble jobs as those.

He was a graduate of an Eastern law school. He could have settled down

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to the practice of law in his father's office in the sleepy Midwestern town in which he had been born and raised, but he had desired a more promising opening.

Against his father's wishes, and those of a certain young lady as well, he had gone West to find it. He had found nothing, and within the last few hours he had decided to return home.

But how? He had no money for rail-

road fare, and Centralium was too many hundreds of miles away to think of getting there afoot. His carefully cultivated running ability seemed useless even for that.

He did not wish to plumb the depths of humiliation by telegraphing his father for money, but, on the other hand, he did not desire to starve, as he surely must now that the last of his pawnable articles was gone.

"I know," he thought, rising suddenly. "I've read about a certain scheme. I'll try it."

He entered an undertaker's office and inquired:

"Got any dead bodies going East?"

The undertaker looked at him.

"No. Why?"

"If you had one, I'd go along with it. Somebody has to ride with a corpse. You could hire me just for the train ticket."

"Yes—if I could trust you."

Jim realized that the man's suspicion was probably justified. The suit he wore had been snappy once, but now it was threadbare.

"I could produce references," he stated. "Know any other undertaker that wants a good man?"

"No one does. I keep track of all the deaths, and there's nothing going East. Sorry. Good day."

"Looks like dad has to come to the rescue," Jim admitted when he walked out.

He bought a newspaper and read the advertisements. Same old insertions. Not a worthwhile job in the column. Here, as elsewhere, the really good jobs were never advertised. Men on the inside of affairs learned about them immediately, and outsiders had small chance.

Jim carried the paper to his box-stall bedroom, and read it from first page to last. That was one thing that a fellow could do at small cost—derive entertainment from the newspapers.

He paused at the sporting page.

"Big race starts to-morrow, eh?"

For several days he had been reading about the transcontinental foot race that was due to start on the following day, but hitherto he had not taken any particular interest in it. In the first place, it was for professional runners, and he was an amateur; in the second, some people considered it a dubious affair that might flicker out halfway to its destination.

Plenty of newspaper space had been devoted to it. Three hundred or more entries had been received. The race would start in the coast city on the following day, and end in New York whenever the runners got there.

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Each day a certain distance had to be traversed—between forty and fifty miles, according to the character of the roads and the situation of the different towns and cities that would be passed—and overnight the contestants would rest at designated stopping places.

The promoter would collect money from the towns through which he would route the race, and the actual running time of each contestant would be recorded each day. The one who reached New York in the least number of running hours would win the first prize of thirty thousand dollars, and there were many lesser prizes as well.

"Might make something out of that if I wanted to turn professional and had trained good and hard for the past few months," Jim Gordon cogitated. "As it is, I wouldn't have a chance."

Jim did not wish to become a professional athlete. Among college men it is considered more or less disgraceful to turn one's athletic ability into cold cash, and Jim preferred to remain on good terms with his old classmates.

Such a thing would adversely affect his social standing in his home town, too, when he returned there, as he had decided to do. He could not play golf for prizes along with his fellow club members, for instance, since they were all amateurs and he would be a professional.

If he could hope to win the first prize of thirty thousand dollars, he might enter the big race, but of course he could not. For many weeks he had done no training—unless tramping the sidewalks in search of a job could be called such—and so rigorous a race would call for the finest possible physical condition.

Nevertheless, as Jim sat in his room striving to think of a way to get back home without wiring his father for money, he played with a temptation to enter the big race and start with the three hundred other contestants on the following day.

The race would pass within fifty miles of Jim's home town in the Middle West, and all along the route the contestants would be fed and lodged by the promoter. Every step that he took would carry him nearer home. Eventually he would arrive at a point only fifty miles from Centralium without cost, and at that point he could drop out of the race.

There were worse ways to get home. Accompanying a corpse would be quicker and better, but no Easterner had died a convenient death. Riding the rods, on the other hand, would be not nearly so good. There might be lots of fun and excitement. Surely he could do well enough to keep from being kicked out of the race until he reached the point at which he would be willing to quit.

"By George, I'd like to enter!" Jim left his room and sauntered toward the race promoter's office, reconsidering the possibilities that might follow such action.

No one at home would need to know about it until he saw fit to tell them. He would have to give his correct name, of course, but he need not state that Centralium, Ohio, was his place of residence.

As a matter of fact, it was not, and had not been for the past four years. One of the little towns at which he had stopped for a few days on his way West or even the Pacific Coast city itself, would do as well.

"Why not?" he said to himself. "I'm probably as well prepared to run such a race as some of the others. Not too fat, with the slim meals I've been eating, that's sure. Can't stick with the leaders, probably, but what's the difference when I only want to go as far as Ohio?

"I wouldn't be cheating the promoter. The more entries he gets, the more interest will be taken by the public in the race. He can well afford to feed and lodge me just for competing, no matter how far behind I fall."

Arriving at the promoter's office, on

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the second floor of an office building, Jim found the place crowded with competitors, and he grew a bit discouraged as he surveyed them.

Some were clean-cut athletes of the type he had known at college, but more were not. All sorts of men were there, lean men and stout men, young ones and old ones, one with a gray beard. All were light-hearted and jovial, all seemed to think the three-thousand-mile race, the greatest that had ever been promoted, would be fun.

After awhile the general enthusiasm began to affect Jim. The race, really, would be a noteworthy one. Already the whole country was talking about it. Undoubtedly it would command a great deal of newspaper space before it was finished. He elbowed his way up to a desk and told a young man who was one of the promoter's lieutenants that he wished to enter.

"All right."

His name was written down, and his address was asked for.

"Redgrass, California," replied Jim, recollecting that he had stopped at such a place for a few days on his way to the coast.

"Any athletic experience?"

"Plenty."

"Where?"

"I don't care to tell you."

The aid scrutinized him.

"Another college guy, eh? Looks like none of you fellows want your records to become known. Can't see why. It's no disgrace to become a professional athlete."

The aid gave Jim two big squares of canvas which had the number 299 printed on them, and instructed him to pin them on his chest and back.

"We'll carry one suitcase for you in a motor truck, but that's all. Start at 9 A.M. to-morrow at the city athletic field. End of first day's run is Ellendale, forty miles out. Here are the printed rules. One dollar entry fee, please."

That being precisely the amount that Jim possessed, he asked if breakfast would be provided before the start next morning.

"No. What's the matter—broke? If that's the case, you can pay the entry fee later."

Jim thanked the fellow, and left the office with the exhilarated feeling that he had let himself in for something big.

"I should worry about my amateur standing," he reasoned on his way back to his room. "Hadn't figured on competing in anything except golf, and I'm too poor at that to win anything."

Fortunately his room rent had been paid in advance—a rigid rule of the landlady, who was accustomed to lodging men of precarious financial standing.

Jim rose early next morning, packed his belongings into his one suitcase, and with his one and only dollar purchased a substantial breakfast.

He had one of his old college running suits, along with a pair of rubber-soled shoes. He donned it at the athletic park, being careful to remove the college letter which he once had been so proud of. He managed to get his street clothes into the suitcase along with the things that were already there, and placed the suitcase on a motor truck, receiving a check for it.

At ten minutes before nine o'clock everything was in readiness for the start of the longest and most arduous athletic contest that the world had ever known. That fact alone caused Jim to consider the affair worthwhile.

He wished that he had trained for three or four months so that he could hope to make a real race of it. It promised to be interesting anyhow, and he was glad he had entered.

There were four official motor trucks that would accompany the runners. Reporters and photographers were there to accompany the race. Not a bad job for those lucky chaps, Jim thought. There were plenty of officials; in fact, Jim was impressed by the

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evidences of good management that he saw on every hand.

Other motor trucks, he learned, had left for the first stopping place, so that when the runners should arrive a camp would be in readiness to feed and lodge them. He knew now that the promoter had successfully managed many big athletic enterprises, and he no longer feared that the race would fizzle out and be abandoned.

Along with more than three hundred others, Jim lined up on the cinder track awaiting the starter's pistol. The contestants were a jovial lot who joked with one another.

"Amateur?" asked a wiry looking fellow who stood next to Jim.

"Yes. You?"

"Not on your life. Wouldn't be here if I were. This is no race for college boys."

"Oh, I don't know." Jim was a bit nettled. "Most of the world's foot-racing records are held by amateurs."

"Little races, maybe. Dashes and half mile, and so on. But this is a real race. Three thousand miles. If there's five of you rah-rah boys who can run that far I'll be surprised."

Having decided that he would drop out at the point along the route nearest his home town, if he could last that long, Jim made no reply.

The starter appeared, pistol in hand.

"On your marks!" he cried.

The contestants lined up in six or seven rows, nobody caring whether he was in the front row or the last.

"Get set!"

Movie operators were turning the cranks of half a dozen cameras.

Crack went the pistol, and a cheer broke from the small crowd of spectators. The coast-to-coast race was under way.

The coast-to-coast race was under way.

II.

Jim Gordon was glad now that his fare had been meager for the past month and that his job hunting had entailed a good deal of pedestrianism. He carried little excess weight on his slim frame, and his incessant walking had kept his wind and legs in fairly good condition.

He jogged along with the others at a pace that for the first few miles was not much faster than a very quick walk. Every one seemed to be afraid of exerting himself too much at the start. Not until the strange cavalcade reached the city limits did any one make an effort to quicken the pace.

It was inevitable that the well trained men should do that, however, and when they did Jim was brought to a quick realization of the fact that he had done no training.

As the pace grew hotter, so did the California sun, which Jim had never been particularly fond of, anyway. Inasmuch as they were going away from the cool coast, it naturally became hotter. Along about noon, when some twenty miles had been covered, it was reflected from the asphalt roadway like heat from a pancake griddle, and Jim became very thirsty.

The management had anticipated this condition, however, and a fast little motor truck drove along the line handing out drinks of cold water to any one who desired it. Most of the men did, and Jim was comforted to some extent by this evidence that he was not the only one to feel the heat.

He was getting quite tired, with only half the day's distance covered; in fact, in the early afternoon he began to wonder if, after all, he had done a sensible thing in entering the race.

The professional runner who had joked Jim about his amateur record kept jogging along beside him, although a great number of runners were ahead of them, and now he began to ease the strain with conversation.

"All in, amateur?" he remarked, in a way which indicated that his breathing was as normal as though he were walking.

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"No chance," replied Jim, though his breathing was not so close to normal as he could have wished it.

"Cheer up; there's only another two thousand, nine hundred and eighty miles to go."

"Thanks for telling me."

"Try to stick it to the first station, anyhow, just for the honor of the dear old coll."

"Don't worry about me. You're not breaking any records yourself."

"Catch me trying at this stage. The last thousand miles are the ones that count, not the first. All three hundred entrants could be ahead of me, instead of only about two hundred, for all I care."

Jim realized that there were really about that number of contestants ahead of him, but since the more experienced man did not seem to mind he could not see why he should. After all, there were another hundred behind him, some a very long distance behind.

"Stick to my heels, amateur," advised the professional, "and maybe I can drag you into second money. What's your name?"

Jim told him, and the man replied that his was Gaffey.

The runners passed through several hamlets and villages and one good-sized town. Everywhere people dropped whatever they were doing to stand alongside the road and watch them, but there was no undue excitement. Jim sensed that he and his fellows were regarded more as freaks than anything else.

It was between four and five o'clock in the afternoon when they entered the town which marked the end of the first day's run. The people here showed far more interest than elsewhere—natural enough in view of the fact that the town council had paid good money to have the first day's run end there.

The council had advertised the affair far and wide, and thus had attracted the whole countryside, the idea being that the visitors would spend money in town, and the place would be advertised by the reporters, who sent out accounts of the race, not only to all parts of the United States, but to foreign countries as well.

Jim ran through solid lanes of humanity to the far side of the town, where a great circus tent had been erected, and there he stopped, very tired, but, on the whole, in no worse condition than he had anticipated.

He rejoiced to find that shower baths had been provided, and that he was able to procure his suitcase without delay. He bathed and dressed, then washed his sweaty running suit and hung it over his cot to dry.

He lay down for awhile and then assuaged his keen hunger at the rough-boarded table that literally bent in the middle with the weight of good food placed upon it. There were no frills, nothing but the plain stuff that athletes should eat, but plenty of it.

Not so bad, Jim thought. Running forty miles was hard work, but he was progressing toward home, and the excellent food and lodging cost him nothing.

He did not bother to make inquiries as to who had made the best time for the day. It did not matter much. As Gaffey had stated, it was not the first thousand miles that counted—though, of course, a fellow who really hoped to win could not afford to let the field get too big a start on him.

After supper Jim lay down again, then took a stroll around the encampment before he undressed for the long sleep that he hoped to obtain.

He did obtain it, and when he faced the starter next morning he felt as fit as he had on the first day. The start was made just as it had been in the coast city, every one lining up and commencing to run when the pistol cracked.

The day passed as uneventfully as had the first day. The hot sun slowed Jim down again; in fact he felt it even more than he had on the previous day,

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because they were getting farther into the interior. Again he was forced to let a great number of runners go past him, even more perhaps than on the previous day.

"Not so good," he thought when he finished, "but so long as there's a hundred behind me I guess the management won't kick."

He ate another big meal with keen relish, as he had early that morning before the start of the race. Upon these two full meals the runners subsisted, though any one was free to take what nourishment he pleased—and could get—during the course of the day's run.

Jim was preparing to go to sleep when an official came to his bedside and he sat up with a premonition that something was about to happen.

"Gordon, James Gordon?"

"Yes."

"From Redgrass, California?"

"Yes."

"Well, you want to make a good showing to-morrow, Gordon, because we're going through your home town."

The man passed on, and Jim was left with something new to think about. The management expected him to do better next day, and it was up to him to try and do it. He had learned, by making inquiries of Gaffey and others, that the management routed the race through the home town of a contestant whenever they could, with the idea that such a town would take more interest in the affair and pay a larger sum to procure the attraction.

The route, it now seemed, was subject to variation. An advance man was making bargains, and the race was being routed wherever the promoter could secure the most remuneration, provided such a place was not too far off the first tentatively determined course.

Jim did not exactly relish the idea of having the race run through Redgrass on his account. He had not anticipated that when he gave the place as his home town.

He could have given other places at which he had stopped temporarily just as well, and now he rather wished that he had. The town might not relish the poor representation he was giving it, might even direct a few sarcastic remarks at him as he passed through.

With the idea of doing as well by Redgrass as he could, Jim made more of an effort next day to stick with the leaders. He could not do it, though. His lack of training was again in evidence, as was his lack of experience in the stifling heat that grew worse each day.

At least a hundred and fifty contestants were ahead of him as he approached the cow town which he recognized as Redgrass. He heard a great yelling as he approached, and he felt a bit heartened. It was nice of the citizens to take an interest in him just because he had advertised the place by claiming it as his home town.

His encouragement turned to dismay when he realized that the inhabitants were not cheering him.

"Oh, you bum!" some roughneck called.

"Who told you you're a Redgrass man?"

"We wouldn't own you!"

"Get out of the race."

"Get a crutch."

Jim flushed angrily and glared about him as he ran through the unpaved street of the poorest of all the towns he had lingered in on his way West. He recognized none of the few people he had met there, and there was some comfort in that; nevertheless this was a humiliation such as he never had undergone in any of his amateur contests, one that he was not prepared for and was in no position to rebuke.

For the first time, he realized that his participation might not turn out to be merely a jaunt to a certain point in Ohio.

There might be drama and thrills such as he had not dreamed of.

Some one yelled that he was a tramp

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who would not be permitted to reside in Redgrass, and Jim wrestled with a temptation to abandon the race, temporarily at least, in order to resent that slur with his two competent fists.

He stifled his anger, however. After all, he had no real right to represent the place—though it was probable that Redgrass would be only too glad to claim him as a resident if he were up with the leaders. He glared at his tormentors and plodded along, not a bit faster because of the slurs that were cast at him.

He was getting out of the town, thankful that his reception was no worse, when he recognized a new development. Two or three rough-looking men with cowboy hats on their heads and guns in their holsters walked out into the roadway and, as he approached, drew their guns.

"Step along, you Redgrass guy!" one of them yelled.

"Hoof it, fellow; you ain't doing good enough to suit us."

"Pick them feet off the ground faster."

A salvo of shots startled Jim. He stepped faster, and the guns barked faster. They were pointed at the ground near his feet, and there was considerable danger that one of the bullets would disable him.

"At-a-boy!" More shots. "Little faster, fellow." Another salvo. "Sprint!" Bang, bang! "Catch up with them leaders!"

The gun-tooters ran alongside him as they fired—a variation of the old Western stunt of firing at a tenderfoot's feet in order to make him dance. Jim got away from his tormentors at last and finished the day's run without further mishap.

At the big tent, after he had finished bathing and dressing, he found that news of the Redgrass affair had reached the reporters, none of whom were riding near him when it occurred. They came flocking around him, demanding full details, and they carried on in a manner that surprised Jim almost as much as had the shooting.

"Really shot at you, did they, Gordon?"

"Give us the dope. This is great. Something has happened at last. The race has been the deadest thing I ever saw up to now."

Jim explained, and the reporters scribbled rapidly. One of them cried gleefully to his comrades:

"I hear there's a town that's threatened to rotten-egg the race when it goes through because the promoter chose another town five miles farther on for a control station and the first town is sore. More excitement, boys. May have a real race yet."

"Wonderful," agreed Gordon with good-natured sarcasm.

That night he wondered if it would not be fun to remain in the race all the way to the Atlantic coast. It was getting more interesting every day. He was getting into better condition as he proceeded, too; might hope perhaps to become a real competitor before the last thousand miles were reached.

III.

THE rotten-egging did not occur at the place where it was expected, though there was no guarantee that it might not happen somewhere else. The inhabitants of the town which considered itself affronted merely lined up on the sidewalk and contented themselves with booing the officials and many of the contestants.

"Look at the dromedary," Jim heard some one say as he pointed to an oldish man who was lumbering along a little distance in front of him.

Jim looked himself and decided that the person referred to did suggest such an animal. The man was lurching along, flatfooted and showing no more form than a truck horse on a race track, but he was getting there just the same.

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Jim had found out by this time that the running form which he attained at college was useless in a three thousand mile grind. For one thing, he had learned to run flatfooted—the worst possible way to run, according to the college coaches. So it was for short distances, but this was a long distance.

By placing his whole foot on the ground at each step, instead of just the ball of his foot, Jim did not make a graceful impression on spectators, but the strain on his leg muscles was appreciably less. He had learned to run with his body muscles relaxed as much as possible too—slouchy but effective when one must conserve one's energy to the utmost.

He had been troubled by tender feet at the start. He had mentioned this to an official and had received instructions in the care of his feet which enabled him to get along all right. His whole body was becoming more hardened every day. Gradually he was working himself into condition. He did not doubt that if he chose to remain in the race he could do much better toward the end.

The runners had crossed the hot desert by then, and that was an advantage to Jim too. Cooler days might be expected from now on, and he could run better in cool weather.

After the end of the first thousand miles Jim had improved his position considerably, but still it was nothing to boast about. Instead of having two hundred competitors ahead of him, as he had after the first few days, there were only about a hundred and twenty-five.

He had to smile whenever he thought about that. He, Jim Gordon, who in his college races had considered it a disgrace to have as many as three men ahead of him, now had more than a hundred!

Once he had been a champion, and now he was not even a real competitor. He simply hoped that none of his old friends guessed that the J. K. Gordon of the coast-to-coast race was none other than the Jim Gordon they had known at college.

Reaching the border of his own State, Ohio, Jim decided that he would not drop out, as he had intended. He was having a good time, he was gradually improving his position, he got along all right with the other runners.

He liked to finish anything he undertook, and there was no telling how good a showing he could make in the last thousand miles. So long as he did not have to run through his home town of Centralium it was all right to be far back in the ruck.

Jim was considerably disturbed when he learned that the tentative route had been changed, and that the race actually would be run through Centralium. Fortunately the place had not been chosen as a control station.

What should he do now? Run through his home town in the miserably poor position that was his, with more than a hundred competitors ahead of him on the score sheet? He did not like to humiliate himself in such a manner, but, on the other hand, he did not want to quit either.

There was a control station thirty miles west of Centralium, and on the evening before the run through his home town, while Jim was still debating what he should do, he received a visit from his father.

James Gordon, Sr., was a very dignified man. He was Centralium's leading lawyer, and the most prominent citizen as well. The Gordon family had founded the town, and for more than a hundred years had been the main pillars of its rather old-fashioned and snobbish society.

Gordon, Sr., gazed at Gordon, Jr., as the latter sat on his cot, and there were pain and wounded pride in his eyes.

"To think," said he, "that a son of mine should so far forget his dignity as to participate in such a disgraceful spectacle as this so-called foot race."

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"What's wrong with the race?" queried Jim.

"Everything. First of all, don't you know that a gentleman may not become a professional athlete? An amateur, yes, but never a professional."

"Bunk," said Jim. "That's a snobbish old world idea that doesn't fit into the American social scheme at all."

"If you had become a professional at a gentleman's game, such as golf, it would be bad enough," went on Mr. Gordon. "But you didn't do that. No. You chose a so-called sport that has been more or less in disgrace for generations. Professional foot racing! It's on a level with prize fighting."

"What if it is?" queried Jim. "What's wrong with prize fighting? Any number of college men are in that game these days. It's a darned good game, too, if you ask me—plenty of money in it, and fame, and good manly competition.

"It is true that professional foot racing has been under a cloud," continued Jim, warming up to the argument, "but is that any reason why it must be forever? This race is going to put the sport on a new level. It's strictly on the square, it's well managed, there's a prize for the winner that's well worth the attention of anybody.

"I entered the race expecting to drop out when I reached Ohio," Jim explained, "but I've grown to like it so well that now I intend to stick. I'm doing better all the time. I might actually get up among the leaders before it's finished."

Mr. Gordon was sorely distressed.

"You cannot mean, James, that you will have the audacity to run through the main street of your own home town—the town which we Gordons founded and in which we have maintained the family dignity for a hundred years?"

"That's precisely what I intend to do."

Mr. Gordon paced up and down in his agitation.

"It would be a family disgrace for you to do that, even if you were one of the leaders. But you're not even anywhere near them. A hundred men are ahead of you."

"What of it? For several days at the start there were two hundred. How do you know I won't get ahead of them all before the finish? We're going to enter the last thousand miles pretty soon, and they're the miles that count."

Mr. Gordon cried: "Never, James, can you become a lawyer in Centralium if you insist upon making such a spectacle of yourself. Never in this world! The practice of law requires dignity, and there would be a shred of that remaining to you. And I had such hope of bringing you into my office."

Jim replied patiently: "I know you had, dad, and I'm sorry to disappoint you. But I just don't feel that becoming a lawyer in a one-horse burg like Centralium is the thing for me. Not enough opportunity for one thing. Too much make-believe in our old home town, and too little real accomplishment."

"But what can you do elsewhere?" Thinking of how he had tried to secure a suitable job in the Pacific Coast city and failed, Jim did not have a very forceful reply.

"I'll find something all right. Maybe in the sports line, dad. That's the big thing nowadays. Sports in America are developing far faster than any form of business. There's big money to be made promoting various kinds of sports, and maybe I can make some of it."

Mr. Gordon shook his head in sorrow.

"If you're determined to make a spectacle of yourself, running in what looks like your underwear before low people that I would scarcely look at, I suppose I cannot stop you. But I'm sorry, James, very sorry."

"I'm sorry, too," said Jim, rising. "But a fellow has to live his own life,

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dad. What was good for the father isn't necessarily good for the son." He grinned as he shook his father's hand. "Maybe I'll make a better showing at the finish—actually win the race perhaps—then you'll be proud of me."

"Never! Not if you win a dozen such low contests."

The old gentleman left, and Jim sat on his cot with his head in his hands, feeling blue.

"Like to please dad," he said to himself. "But, hang it, my life's my own! He did what he wished in his youth, so why shouldn't I?"

He was still trying to justify his conduct when, ten minutes later, another visitor arrived—Mary Summerville, with whom he had been on very friendly terms.

"Jim!" she cried, "is what your father told me correct? Are you actually going to disgrace all of us by running through the streets of Centralium to-morrow with this notorious mob that's become more or less of a joke throughout the whole country?"

Jim rose and pressed Mary's hand, and they sat down side by side on his cot.

"That's my intention," he told her. "But about that joke business—who says the race is a joke?"

"Everybody. Goodness, don't you read the newspapers? The affair is nothing but a low money-making scheme, and everybody knows it. As different from running for medals, which a gentleman may do without loss of social standing, as daylight is from darkness."

Jim thought of the championship "gold" medal, for which a pawnbroker would allow him only a dollar fifty, and replied: "There's a difference all right; I know that. But a fellow has to make a living, Mary. I feel that I could never really succeed at the law, and I might at the sports game, either as competitor or promoter, so why shouldn't I stick to sports?"

Mary seemed greatly concerned, and Jim wondered just how much she liked him, also how much he liked her. He never had been able to decide. There were times when he had thought that he liked Mary very much indeed, other times when she left him cold. There never had been any talk of an engagement between them; they just had been good friends ever since they attended the Centralium High School together.

"It wouldn't be so bad if you were succeeding in this wretched race for money," Mary went on. "I'm not so prejudiced as your father. I can understand that there might be some excuse for competing if you could hope to win the thirty thousand dollar first prize. But you cannot. You're away behind. There's a hundred men ahead of you."

"The last thousand miles are still to be run," Jim reminded her.

"Oh, don't tell me that you hope to win. You cannot possibly. All you can do is disgrace yourself, your family, your town, your college."

"Your idea, then, is that professional running is all right if a fellow wins, but rotten if he loses. In other words, success or failure is what counts. Is that right?"

"It does make a difference."

"I see. You're strong for the man that wins, but pretty cool toward the fellow who fails. That's your style, is it? You're a worshiper of success. I didn't know that before, Mary."

"That's an unfair way to put it."

"I'm not so sure. Come right down to brass tacks, I suppose you used to pal around with me in Centralium just because I was the son of the outstanding citizen."

"You don't think I had so little self-respect as to be seen with some common clerk, do you?"

Jim grinned ruefully.

"Thanks, Mary. It's nice to know that you liked my family background and social position more than you did me."

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Mary rose angrily.

"Jim Gordon, I didn't come here to hear spiteful remarks. You're getting quite as common as the so-called athletes you're associating with.

"I came to tell you this—make a spectacle of yourself on the public street to-morrow, run through your home town half naked and perspiring and dirty—humiliate me by doing that, and I'll never speak to you again as long as I live."

"All right."

She looked at him.

"Are you going to do it?"

"I think so."

"Very well—good by!" And she swept out like an angry duchess, leaving Jim to stare after her, not quite knowing whether he was glad or sorry—sorry because he was about to lose a girl friend whom he had thought he liked a great deal, glad to learn, before it was too late, that what she liked about him was his social position and college education and prospects for material success.

IV.

Jim Gordon lined up for the start on the following morning determined to make a good showing for the day, even though he should have to pay heavily for it by making a very poor showing on the following day.

For the last few days he had been running well within his ability, not exerting himself too much, content to better his position slowly but surely, never forgetting that the hardest part of the race lay ahead.

He felt that the daily run of between thirty-five and fifty miles had been the best sort of training, and that now he was in as good physical condition as any contender had been at the start. There were even times when he was tempted to reason that his lack of training before the start might prove to be a good thing in the end.

Men who trained too much became stale. Some of the contenders who made the best showing at the start were making a poor show now.

Starting even with all the runners on this particular day, Jim glued himself to the heels of the man who led the pack by virtue of the fact that his elapsed time since leaving the Pacific coast was less than any one's, and strove to maintain that position.

He could not do it. The man—a European who, as an amateur, had won an Olympic championship—began to draw away from him pretty soon, and this had the effect of dashing Jim's optimism considerably.

He had figured that his improved condition should enable him to stick pretty close to the leaders, but his calculation was evidently astray. He either had not worked himself into sufficently good condition even yet, or he simply was not capable of doing better.

Ten, twenty, thirty runners got ahead of him. He plodded along, however, gritting his teeth, at the necessity for running through his home town where he was so well known, but not for a moment considering the abandonment of the race before he reached Centralium, which his father and girl friend desired.

Unexpectedly, while passing through a small town about ten miles west of Centralium, the whole cavalcade experienced the hostility which had often been talked of by the reporters and other contenders and never experienced.

It seemed that the advance man had considered the town for a control station and had bargained with it to that effect. The deal had fallen through, and the townspeople were very angry about it, claiming they had been given a raw deal and all that sort of thing.

They had confidently expected the day's racing to end there, which naturally would attract a much larger crowd and provide far more excitement than

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merely to have the race proceed through without stopping.

They were so extremely angry that the hoodlum element collected decayed vegetables and some aged eggs and tossed them, first at the truckload of officials which preceded the runners and then at the runners themselves.

Jim Gordon was unfortunate enough not to see the egg which was tossed in his direction. It struck him squarely on the chest and, while it did not slow him up a particle, it made a considerable mess on the running suit which he was particularly anxious on this occasion to keep neat and spotless.

He cleaned up as well as he could with the handkerchief which he carried in a little pocket at his waist, but he could not remove all the moisture, and naturally the dust of the roadway settled on such moist areas.

It was a hot day, too, and he perspired freely. There was plenty of dust, and he could feel this settling on his features till he did not doubt that he was a very disreputable looking object.

Thus he entered his home town, egg-stained, dust-covered, more weary than usual because he had permitted only about thirty runners to get ahead of him instead of the usual ninety or so—a sight that he feared would shock his father.

How odd seemed the old familiar main street. A group of boys whom he knew slightly or not at all met him on bicycles at the edge of town and called encouragement to him and, farther along, shopkeepers and laborers and such folks cheered him, too, but he feared that when he passed the broad veranda of the Centralium Club, where most of his old friends would be expected to congregate, he would not be received in so kindly a manner. He did not like to pass them, but he had to.

Yes, they were all there—girls with whom he had danced, men with whom he had played golf, all the people who considered themselves superior to the common herd, who disapproved of professional athletics in any form, who must have resented the defection of one of their own class just as did his father and Mary Summerville.

Jim pretended to pay no attention to them as he plodded past—tired, dirty, bedraggled, very low in spirit—but really he was paying a great deal of attention. Out of the corner of his eye he saw men and women point fingers at him and shake their heads. They were pitying him, and he would just as soon have them toss rotten eggs.

A few of the club spectators clapped their hands and called faint words of encouragement, but Jim knew that their applause was not heartfelt. They considered him a fool. He knew that they did. They looked upon him and all his fellow runners just as they would have looked upon an organ grinder and a monkey, as something to afford a moment's amusement and then be forgotten.

Oh, well. Soon he would be beyond their stares and their pitying comments. He had anticipated it all. He did not care what they thought of him, because he would never live among them again. He plodded on. He stumbled into the control station ten miles beyond Centralium both exhausted and disgusted, more tempted to quit now that he had made a pitiful spectacle of himself than he ever had been before.

His father did not come to see him, nor did Mary. No one did, not even the kids on bicycles who had cheered his efforts. He felt that Centralium considered him an outcast, one who could henceforth make his own way in life without either praise or blame from them.

So be it then. He did not like the town any better than the town liked him. All along he had felt that his old crowd was snobbish and narrow-minded, and now he knew it.

But he wouldn't quit. No, sir. He would stick to the finish. People could

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call him a rotten runner; but he wouldn't permit them to call him a quitter.

He was surprised when, at last, an old friend arrived—"Doc" Whiting, with whom he had played many a round of golf on the Centralium links. The old doctor shook Jim's hand warmly and congratulated him on the showing he had made that day.

"Quit kidding me," Jim told him, grateful, nevertheless, because at least one of his Centralium friends had not deserted him. "Thirty men finished ahead of me to-day, and you know it."

"Sure—and a hundred and thirty finished behind you. Keep going, Jim. You'll win yet—cut in on the prize money, at any rate."

"Thanks for saying so, even if you don't mean it."

"But I do, Jim. What's more, I'm going to help you. That's what I'm here for."

"How?"

"Hah! Think I was never an athlete and know nothing about the game, eh? Well, that's where you're mistaken. I've coached some mighty good runners in my day, Jim, and I'll coach you if you'll let me."

"Only too delighted."

"All right. Let's get down to business. What do you eat? What kind of massage do you get every night? Tell me everything."

Jim did so.

"Diet's not right," pronounced Doc Whiting. "Change it this way and you'll do better." He wrote down the kinds of food to which Jim should confine himself. "Now about massage." He gave detailed instructions about that, too.

Jim knew how to diet and train for college athletics, but this race, the doctor said, was different. An entirely new system should be followed.

Jim realized that all along he had not been utilizing his physical equipment to the best advantage, and hope returned to him. He promised doc that he would follow his instructions to the letter, and then he asked, shyly, what the people of Centralium thought of him.

"Not so much, I'm afraid," doc confessed. "Think a college athlete of your standing should have kept out. Old-fashioned, you know. Win the race, though, and watch them change. They'd welcome you home with a brass band if you did that, Jim."

"I was very sorry to have to cross dad," Jim confessed.

"Yes, the old gent took it hard. But he'll forget all that, too, if you win—or even if you make a fine showing."

Jim's old grin returned.

"Well, I've got a thousand miles to do it in, doc. Lots of things can happen before that distance is traveled, eh?"

"I'll say so. They're the miles that count. How many hours is the leader—Santini, isn't it?—ahead of you in elapsed time?"

"More than fifteen."

Doc shook his white head. "That's a lot of time to make up, Jim; but maybe you can do it."

"Do my best, anyhow."

Alone again, Jim felt a renewal of the confidence that had been his on the previous night. Doc's system, which he would follow faithfully, might help a lot. The weather was cool, and that would help.

Probably he had not reached the peak of condition yet either. Any day he might get a break that would lop several hours off those that separated him from the leader. Come to think of it, he was the thirtieth man to complete the day's run instead of the one hundredth, and he had not felt the strain of the faster pace as much as he had anticipated.

Hereafter he would put more effort into his running. So far he had just been fooling along. Now was the time to get busy on those last thousand miles.

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Several days later Jim got the break he had been hoping for, and a very thrilling one it proved to be, too.

He was surprised, as he plodded along some ten minutes behind the leader, to find that all the runners ahead of him, as well as the motor trucks carrying the officials and reporters, had stopped in the middle of the road. Joining them, he saw the reason.

A bridge had been carried away and there was no way to cross the flooded river that lay at their feet. Everybody was standing around wondering what could be done about it, and trying to guess how far the caravan would have to travel to reach a bridge that had not been carried away. Some said five miles, and some said twenty-five.

Jim approached an official.

"The race is still on, isn't it? Our schedule for to-day is from last night's stopping place to a town ahead called Millwright, isn't it?"

The man hesitated. "Ye-es—but we're stopped, you see? Have to find another route—or some way to get across here."

"I'm not stopped; I'm going ahead."

"How?"

"Swim."

The official stared. "Man, you're crazy. Look at the swift current. You'd be carried away and drowned. This isn't a swimming race. You're not to plunge into that water."

Jim protested: "I can swim it and I'm going to. This is a cross-country race and in that sort of contest one overcomes obstacles any way possible. I insist on following the route to Millwright as it was announced this morning."

Reporters had gathered, and Jim appealed to them. "Am I right or am I not? I maintain that once we're started on our route for the day the route can't be changed."

The reporters were glad to see some excitement stirred up.

"Absolutely, you're right," said one.

"You're wrong," maintained another. "This is a foot race. Running or walking is fair, but swimming isn't."

The man who had the final say regarding the race, the referee, was called upon, and even he took a little time to consider the problem.

"Your contention that the route from one control station to another can't be changed once the day's run is started is perfectly correct," he told Jim. "We'll stick to our route.

"We'll get across this river as soon as we can, over whatever sort of bridge we can fix up, and the first man to reach Millwright will have his time counted just the same as it's been counted at every other control station. But you've got to run or walk. Swimming will disqualify you."

Jim was disappointed, but after a moment's thought he agreed that possibly the crossing of the river by swimming might be considered unfair to the nonswimmers.

He thought of another idea.

"Just so long as I cross this river running or walking it's all right, eh? You're positive about that?"

"Absolutely," assured the referee. He pointed to the swirling stream and added with a grin. "Go ahead and either walk or run across. I'd like to see you do it."

"All right," said Jim, "I shall."

The official stared at him.

"Before we get a temporary bridge rigged up? How?"

"Watch and see."

All the other runners who had arrived at the stream stood around helplessly waiting for some sort of passage to be provided. The stream was not wide—only some fifty or sixty feet—and already a truck had been sent for carpenters who would erect a temporary structure upon which the runners could cross, while the trucks scouted upstream and down for a regular bridge that had not been washed out.

Jim was the one contestant who did not stand helplessly on the bank waiting for something to be done for him.

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He trotted to a near-by farmhouse and came back presently with a ball of twine, a clothesline and a coil of medium heavy rope, also with something else that brought murmurs of astonishment from everybody, most of all from the reporters—a makeshift bow and arrow.

Jim tied the twine to the arrow and shot it across the swirling channel of water to some men who were standing on the far side, as helpless as the men on Jim's side.

Jim instructed them to pull the clothesline across by means of the twine, then he asked them to pull across the rope which was tied to the clothesline. He told them to pull the rope as tightly as they could and tie it, and he did the same thing on his side.

By this time the farmer from whom Jim had secured the rope had arrived with a long pole. Jim took it from him and announced his intention of trying to cross on the rope.

"That won't be running," he informed the referee, "but it will be walking, and you just said that was fair. If I fall into the water I'll swim back to this side and cross your bridge when you get it rigged up.

"But if I do get across I'll continue on to Millwright, and I insist that my time shall be counted just as though the bridge here had never got washed out at all."

The reporters cheered, while the other runners looked dismayed. The referee was forced to agree that if Jim could walk across on a rope he would be complying with the rules.

He was watched with breathless interest as he essayed the task. The rope was none too tight, despite the efforts that had been made to make it so, but he was fortunate enough to secure a good balancing pole.

Jim did not fear a fall into the river because he felt sure he could swim out. He had not walked on a rope for years, not since he used to play circus as a boy, but his rubber-soled shoes gripped the rope like a professional's, and he thought that, with luck, he might be able to make it.

He got as far as the middle of the stream without mishap. He did not look down at the rushing water because he feared it would make him dizzy, just kept his eyes fixed on the men who stood tensely watching him from the farther shore.

At the most critical point the rope began to sway. Jim swayed with it, balancing himself with his pole, and after awhile it grew steady again.

The rope had sagged in the middle, however, and now he was forced to proceed up a slight incline as well as keep his balance. Step by step he managed to do it.

There was a cheer, even from his competitors, when he landed safely. He dropped the pole and thanked the men who had helped him. He offered to send them money from Millwright for their trouble, having secured a slight loan from Doc Whiting; but they refused any and wished him the best of luck.

Jim did not look back to see who, if any one, was trying to follow in his footsteps. The race was becoming too serious an affair to permit of wasted time. The leader was fourteen hours ahead of him in elapsed time, and there were only a thousand miles left in which to make up his deficiency.

He trotted along with renewed hope, and as he proceeded, alone, through various villages and towns he received a reception that amounted almost to an ovation. News of his daring crossing of the river had been telephoned ahead.

Ten miles beyond the river he was informed by a man who ran beside him for a short distance that others had essayed the tight-rope crossing, but only two had succeeded, and they were runners who were behind him in elapsed time. Not one of the leaders had attempted the crossing because of a possible injury which might put them out of the race.

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When Jim arrived at Millwright late in the afternoon he was glad to find that the timekeeper's conveyance had preceded him, having crossed the river in another place.

Jim gained six hours on the leader by his rope-walking feat, and, for the first time, began to entertain a hope not only of finishing well up with the leaders, but of actually winning the great race. He was only eight hours behind now, and he felt more fit than at any time during the progress of the contest.

The daily run had rounded him into the finest possible condition, the regimen that Doc Whiting had prescribed for him was helpful, the applause he had received that day removed the discouragement that had descended upon him when he plodded through his home town of Centralium.

V.

NEXT day Jim remained with the leaders all day and finished in second position, an achievement which might have resulted, however, from having secured a full night's rest while many of the others, who did not reach Millwright until midnight or later, secured only a comparatively short rest.

This turned out not to be the case; Jim kept right on the heels of the leaders during the three days that followed.

But he did not gain upon them. That was the fact which troubled him sorely. Keeping even was not sufficient. He had eight hours in elapsed time to make up, and he was failing to make up even as much as eight minutes.

Continue that way until the end, and he would finish outside the prize money, even though he might actually beat the whole field, on the last day, into the New York baseball park, where the great race was scheduled to end. Elapsed time was what counted, and Santini still had a big advantage over him in that respect; some forty others also.

Something must be done quickly. And yet what could be done? It was true that he was growing stronger, but that might be true of Santini and the others; at least, they were showing no signs of weakness.

With about seven hundred miles to go, Jim was amazed, one evening to receive a visit from a man such as he never had seen or heard of.

This man's age was about the same as Jim's. His name, he announced, was Gerald Heming, but it was neither of those facts that particularly claimed Jim's notice.

The thing that brought him to his feet, staring, was the fact that Gerald Heming looked so much like him that he might be his twin brother.

Jim had heard of such physical resemblance between persons who were not related. He had seen in magazines the pictures of different men who looked almost exactly the pictures of President Lincoln, he knew that a motion picture had been made in which a living man looked precisely like President Roosevelt, he had learned that almost every person has his physical counterpart and that often great frauds have been perpetrated by such means.

Nevertheless Jim was astonished to look upon the form and features of a young man who resembled him so much that it was easy to believe at first that he was the victim of a hallucination, and that he was speaking to his own reflection in a mirror. He noticed various small differences in a moment, but this abated his surprise only a little.

Heming said, "May I talk to you alone, Gordon? Where there won't be any possibility of being overheard?"

"Sure," said Jim, and led the fellow to an empty corner of the big tent in which all the runners were housed each night. "What's on your mind?"

The fellow grinned in a slinky sort of way that Jim did not like. He sat down on a wooden box and peered all around again to make sure he could not be overheard, then in a low tone:

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"You're not doing so well in the race, are you? You're eight hours behind the leader and there seems to be small chance that you can catch up."

"That's right," Jim admitted. "What about it?"

"I can tell you how you can catch up."

"That's fine," Jim said. "I've been looking for a fellow like you. How can I?"

"Would you be game for some foxy work?"

Jim gave his physical counterpart a shrewd look. He guessed that the fellow had some crooked scheme in mind, should have divined that, he told himself, just from the general appearance of Gerald Heming. Wishing to learn about any possible trickery that might be pulled off in the race, however, he replied:

"Can't tell till I hear what it is. What's your idea?"

Heming lowered his voice still more. "I look just like you, don't I? You've noticed that already?"

"Yes."

"I'm a pretty good runner, too, and just now I'm in fine shape. For a few days at least I could step out on the road and beat the socks off any of you fellows that have run all the way from the Pacific Coast."

"I suppose you could," Jim admitted. "Any fairly good runner should be able to do that."

"Then why shouldn't we make a little arrangement between ourselves so I can replace you on the road every now and then?"

Jim stared, though he had expected some such proposition.

"It could be done," Heming went on. "I'm positive of that. All I'd have to do is wear a running suit that looks just like yours, and pin on the front and back of it numbers that are exact duplicates of yours, and ride along beside you in a closed car till a good chance came to slip out of it and let you slip in.

"That would be at some point along the road where no spectator would be looking and where no competitor would be near you. You could arrange that last part—just get running all by yourself. Get the idea?"

Jim got it all right. He mastered the indignation that grew upon him stronger than ever, and asked for further information because he thought it might come in handy before the race was concluded.

"You'd run all day in my place, then swap places with me again along toward the end of the jaunt, eh? At another lonesome spot the car would edge up close and I could slip out of it, after having enjoyed a ride for several hours, while you would slip in? The checkers along the road wouldn't get wise to the substitution because you look so much like me—"

"Sure," interrupted Heming with eager enthusiasm. "I could even dirty up my face a bit. Of course I'd dirty up my running suit—so no one could possibly get wise."

"When I checked in at the control station the officials wouldn't dream that you had done the bulk of my running for me that day."

"They sure wouldn't."

"But how could you profit by a deal like that?" Jim asked. "Expect me to pay you?"

Heming shrugged his shoulders.

"You could tip me a little something when you pulled down the thirty thousand if you want to, but if you don't, all right. I'd get mine another way—by betting on you. I suppose you know that there's an awful lot of money getting bet on this race.

"The whole country is getting excited about it, now that the finish is in sight. The odds against you are still fifty to one—were a hundred to one before you pulled that rope-walking stunt—and that's where I'd clean up big. See?

"Bet the works on you at fifty to one against—then make up for you the

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eight hours you're behind, so you'll be sure to win."

The scheme appeared quite feasible to Jim. Motor cars were permitted to proceed beside the runners, in fact such cars had become a bit of nuisance at some points because of the gasoline fumes they exuded.

A substitute runner might easily drop out of such a car while the real contestant darted inside, and proceed for miles and miles without the substitution being noticed, provided they looked alike and their running style was not too dissimilar.

Heming had not overlooked the latter point.

"Maybe you think the officials would get wise because I don't run like you do," he said. "Well, you're wrong. I've watched your style and I can imitate it exactly—not a hard job because, since I'm built like you, I run the same way."

"If I started to make up my lost hours I'd be watched pretty closely," Jim remarked. "You think you can stand a closer scrutiny than I've ever had so far, and still put the impersonation across?"

"I do."

Heming had grown very eager since it seemed that Jim might entertain his crooked proposition.

"What about it?" he asked. "Are you on? It's the chance of a lifetime for both of us to clean up. Thirty thousand dollars for you, not to mention a vaudeville contract and various side pickings, and almost as much for me by betting on you at fifty to one.

"You wouldn't be fool enough to throw away a sure fortune like that, would you? Especially when you haven't a chance on earth to win otherwise."

Jim rose.

"That 'll be enough," he said. "I listened to all you had to say because I wanted to learn the details of how you think such a crooked scheme could be carried out.

"I haven't really entertained your proposition for an instant and, what's more, I wouldn't for any consideration whatsoever. Simply because I'm straight. I'll win on my merits or not at all. That's all. Good night and bad luck."

"You're a fool!" Heming muttered at him.

"Another crack like that from you and you're liable to be an invalid. I haven't lost my punch because I've run all the way from the coast. You'd better get out now. And here's something to keep in mind—let me see you hanging around anywhere along the course and I'll tip off the officials about you."

Heming showed his teeth in a sneer. "More than one way to skin a cat," he mumbled mysteriously and threateningly, and then made off rapidly as though he feared Jim's strong right arm.

Jim lay on his cot, vaguely disturbed.

"Dirty crooks," he thought. "Sticking their filthy paws into sporting events of all kinds whenever they get a chance. They're the ones who ruined professional running in the old days; boxing and other sports, too, till the honest promoters managed to run them out.

"The rat! So sore at me now, I suppose, that he'll do me dirt if he gets a chance. Have to watch out for him and all the rest of the crooks that 'll be on our heels now we're entering the home stretch."

He was glad he had secured the details of Heming's scheme because, in case another runner who was behind moved up with unexpected rapidity, he could tip off the referee and have that runner carefully watched.

When he lined up for the next day's start Jim felt so fighting mad about the crooked proposition that he punished himself more severely than ever before.

All day it rained. Rainy days were nothing new, but on this occasion the road seemed unusually heavy. Jim was inclined to bemoan his bad luck at first,

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but after awhile, when he realized that the heavy going was even harder on the leaders than it was on him, he revised his opinion of his luck.

To his surprise he not only kept even with Santini and the other leaders for half of the forty-four miles which comprised that day's run, but on the latter half of the way actually ran ahead of them all.

How did he do it, Jim asked himself. Were they getting weaker while he grew stronger? That seemed to be the case—either that or he had not punished himself sufficiently during the previous stages. He seemed to possess stores of endurance which he had not tapped as yet.

"Got to go the limit every day," he thought. "No more holding back. I've done too much of that. It was the wise thing to do at first because I was in poor condition, but now I'm in as fine shape as any one—better than most, if our performance to-day is any criterion."

He could hear groups of spectators pitying him as he ran past them, and he realized that apparently he deserved their pity. They were clad in raincoats and overshoes and held umbrellas over their heads while he was dripping wet from head to foot. Mud was spattered all over him.

Nevertheless he felt fine. The rain was cool and soothing on his skin, which so often had smarted under a hot sun; the low temperature did not sap his energy as heat did.

He knew now that it was the warmth of the desert at the start of the race which had kept him far back in the ruck, which had caused him to make so miserable a showing when he ran through his home town of Centralium.

The cooler weather that he experienced every day now, even when it did not rain, as it frequently did, was as much of an aid to him as it appeared to be a handicap to Santini and many of the others.

They were hot-weather performers while he was a cold-weather one. Luck! He could count on fairly cool weather all the way to the finish. He was running faster than ever. He might hope to win!

His hope became brighter when he gained more than an hour of his lost time that day, but he did not fail to realize that there were seven additional hours which he must gain—and even then he would only be on an even footing with Santini, who still was the leader.

His average gain for each and every day of those that remained would have to be about half an hour. A tough task—but maybe he could do it.

VI.

In one way Jim was helped by his distressing experience in his home town, but in another way he was hindered.

Recollection of the frigid reception he had received from the people there who he had supposed were his friends never failed to make him angry and this anger caused him to become furiously determined to win. What a triumph it would be to become the celebrity that he surely would be, if he could manage to make the best running time.

World's champion runner! That was the title that would be conferred upon the winner, he knew, and the winner would deserve it. The amateurs could not dispute it because their champion was entered, having turned professional in order to compete, just as Jim had. Santini was that man.

All over the world the name and fame of the winner would travel. The first prize of thirty thousand dollars was only one of the many rewards he could expect to receive.

Besides the vaudeville contracts, there would be a motion picture one as well if the winner should happen to be young and possessed of some screen personality.

There would be his personal story of

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the race that would bring a large sum from some newspaper, and many sums that could be secured for indorsing this or that article of merchandise, if the winner wished to barter his name in that manner.

Plenty of revenge Jim would have upon his home-town social set if he won.

But, win or lose, his affair with the girl whom he once had fancied himself to be in love with was finished and done with. Never again would he and Mary Summerville be sweethearts.

She might be willing to accept his homage if he won, might even be eager to do so, but in that case he would feel that it was his achievement that counted instead of his personality, and his self-respect would compel him to keep away from her. If he lost, he felt that she would not want him back.

It was a bit distressing to feel that, whatever happened, he had lost Mary forever. Plenty of good times he had had with her. No mushy love-making, but just good wholesome hours spent in each other's company, dancing, playing games together, indulging in the amateur dramatics that both of them had once been keenly interested in. It was nice to have a girl friend like that.

Sometimes Jim wondered if he should ever find another. It would not be easy. Girls there were in abundance, but not so many that a fellow could "hit it off" with, even to a slight extent; that is, a particular fellow like himself who could feel interested only in a girl who possessed good looks, style, pep, accomplishments, a keen mind, a reasonable amount of education.

It was true that Jim had little time to think of girls nowadays. Thoughts of victory became more and more prevalent in Jim's mind as each day's distance was run.

Steadily he was cutting down Santini's lead in elapsed time. For three days now he had finished first. His name was on the tongue of every spectator—no small degree of fame in itself, but one which did not begin to satisfy him.

Victory! Nothing else would content him. Once he would have been amply satisfied to finish in fifth or even in tenth position, since there were enough prizes for such finishers, but that time was long past. Every day now he was pushing himself to the limit of his power. Place by place he had moved up toward the front, until finally he stood seventh on the score sheet.

The sixth man was only four minutes ahead of him, and therefore he might hope soon to pass him. The fifth man had half an hour's lead, but Jim felt he could cut that down, too. The fourth man had a little more than an hour; not beyond his reach either.

But the remaining three—tough work it would be to move up on even terms with those birds.

Santini in particular. The favorite still possessed a lead of three whole hours on Jim, a tremendous amount of time in view of the fact that the great race had less than four hundred miles to go.

Four hundred miles! Jim Gordon marveled at himself as he realized that he was regarding that tremendous number of miles as a comparatively short distance. Only a few short months ago he would have considered it impossible for him to run that far even if he were given a month to do it in.

Now the distance was to be traveled at the rate of about forty miles a day, with every day a real race instead of just a dog-trotting jaunt as it had been at first.

"Just shows what a man can do when he tries," he cogitated. "People think that a certain accomplishment is beyond human endurance and therefore don't try to do it, when the truth seems to be that there's hardly any limit to what can be done when one tries

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hard enough and works into it gradually."

The notice that the great race was receiving, now that it was nearing its conclusion and its success was assured, was tremendous. At every town and village along the route business was suspended for hours while the populace lined the streets to watch the amazing procession. People now regarded it as a marvel of modern athletic achievement.

With perfect regularity Jim Gordon finished in front each day. Beyond all doubt he was the best man in the race at that time. Little by little he whittled down the time leads of the men in front of him. He moved up to sixth place, to fifth, fourth, finally to third.

But this daily evidence that he was then the best runner would not suffice to win the race. It was the actual running time from the Pacific coast that would count. And the long start that Jim had permitted the other runners to secure on him back in California and Texas and Oklahoma was a handicap that he sometimes despaired of overcoming.

Small satisfaction it would be to race into New York at the head of the procession if the figures in the timekeeper's book showed that his elapsed time from the Pacific coast was greater than that of Santini or of the second man, whose name was Smith.

The sport-loving populace of the great metropolis would cheer him to the echo, but it would be another man who would receive the first prize of thirty thousand dollars.

He still hoped that he could win, however. Two hundred and fifty miles from the finish, Santini's lead was one hour and fifty minutes, Smith's one hour and five minutes.

Jim commenced the final week of running on a bright and cool Monday morning—and before he finished the day's allotment of miles he had run into an experience which was destined to remain more vividly in his memory than any other occurrence of that never to be forgotten race across the American continent.

VII.

THE town that the runners started from on Monday morning was called Valence. The starter's pistol was fired promptly at 9 A.M., as it had been every other morning, and at once Jim Gordon sprang to the front of the pack.

All the way to the edge of town there were competitors who hung on his heels, but as they passed a water tower he gradually drew away, and soon was running by himself in front of every one else, as he had been doing every day recently.

Running seemed as easy and natural to Jim now as walking once had been. He loped along with only half the effort he had put into his task at the start. Nature, with its usual adaptability, seemed to have refashioned his body for the daily demand that was being made upon it.

Beyond the town water tower there was a long hill that slowed Jim down considerably, but when he reached the top of it and glanced back he had the satisfaction of noting that it seemed to be even harder on his competitors than it had been on him. He was all alone except for a single black car that was following him, as cars often did for many miles.

He breezed along the smooth and level roadway that now lay before him, amusing himself as he did so by looking at the well-tilled fields and comfortable farmhouses that lay on either side.

He glimpsed another town in the distance, and soon was running through it to the usual accompaniment of cheers from the crowds that lined the sidewalks. He got so much applause nowadays that he no longer paid a great deal of attention to it. He did not know the name of the town, and did not care. He had passed through so many that they all looked alike.

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He never had any trouble in determining which was the proper road to follow when he came to a crossroads, as he frequently did, because the race management never failed to have a sign up with an arrow to indicate the correct direction.

Upon leaving this town he was somewhat annoyed to find that a big open car, with a yellow body and shiny wire wheels, had swung into the roadway ahead of him and was annoying him to some extent because it not only kicked up dust, but exuded an odor of burned gasoline that was unpleasant.

He shouted a request to the driver to get behind him, and the driver obligingly did so. Jim looked back presently to see if the yellow car was following him, and he saw that it was, and that the closed black car was continuing to trail him, too.

He came to a stretch of road presently that seemed to have been rained on recently. He found a big puddle right in the middle of the road and ran around the side of it, and just as he did so the yellow car went past him. The wheels splashed mud upon his running suit, and he was minded to warn the driver again not to annoy him, but the car kept on going fast and disappeared.

"If I never see you again," said Jim to himself, "that will be soon enough."

The closed black car was still behind, but it did not annoy Jim, and he paid no attention to it. In fact, he liked to have a car or two somewhere near him. Usually an official car preceded the runners, but this was not in evidence to-day. Cars seemed to provide company, and in addition the thought that people were watching him was stimulating.

After another hour or so Jim ran through another town, and there occurred another small incident that he was able to recollect later on, when the necessity for recollecting every incident of that noteworthy day became urgent.

In front of a barber shop a man stood with a milk bottle full of water and offered him a drink.

Jim was suspicious of people who offered him drinks and did not accept any. The water might be drugged, he thought, for the express purpose of causing him illness and thus forcing him out of the race. He accepted the proffered bottle, but instead of taking a drink he emptied the water upon the back of his neck, where it always seemed to do the most good when he was feeling hot.

The coolness was refreshing. It was about noon, and the heat, while not so suffocating as it had been back on the California and Texas deserts, was sufficient to cause him just a slight bit of discomfort.

He handed the bottle to a boy who stood by the roadside and continued the easy loping stride that was carrying him along quite satisfactorily.

A man told him he had seventeen miles to go to the control station that would end the day's run, and Jim nodded his thanks. He speeded up a little.

All the while the closed black car continued to follow him. The occupants never addressed a word to him, and he did not address them. He had glanced at the driver once without recognizing him.

Jim ran so fast in his effort to gain as much time as possible, that an hour later he was quite tired. He felt very dusty and dirty, and thirsty as well. He wished that some one whom he could trust would show up with a drink of water.

He felt very pleased when, only a few minutes later on, such a person did appear.

It was a girl who stood by the roadside, and as he approached her, Jim thought that there, at last, was the sort of girl with whom, at a less urgent moment, he would rather like to get acquainted. Plenty of girls he had passed, but none of them had made any definite impression on him.

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This one, somehow, was different. Having nothing else to occupy his mind, he studied her during the half minute that it took him to approach her after he first sighted her, and the nearer he came to her the better he liked her.

She was good-looking, and she was dressed nicely. The place outside of which she stood was no commonplace farm, either; rather it seemed to be a country estate, though not one of the pretentious ones with high walls and an air of smug exclusiveness that he had passed on several occasions during the last few days.

There was a huge lawn with shrubbery and flowers, and a low hedge in front, and a modest house stood back of some fine old trees.

Jim liked the appearance of the place as well as he liked the appearance of the girl. It boasted a name, and he made a mental note of it—Sunnylawn.

He was delighted as he approached the girl to note that she had deliberately prepared to dispense aid and comfort to the runners. She had a pail of water and a tin dipper on a bench, and also sandwiches.

She smiled as he approached, and Jim smiled back at her. Gosh, but she was pretty!

She held out a dipper of water and said, "Have a drink?"

Jim slowed to a walk, as he did occasionally to refresh his muscles.

"Thanks," he said. "Awfully good of you. Just what I wanted."

He was not afraid to drink the water that this girl proffered, because it was unthinkable that she should try to drug him. He swallowed a little, and was about to pour the remainder on his hot and dusty face when the thought occurred to him that such action would not be exactly nice in front of a lady.

"Wish I had a handkerchief," he said.

"Here," and she handed him a filmy little affair with a lace border.

He poured water upon the handkerchief and swabbed his face and neck with it—not a very gentlemanly performance, either, but the girl was so obviously anxious to be helpful that he was sure she would not mind.

"Wonderfully good of you," he said, and started to hand back the handkerchief.

"Keep it," she said. "You might need it again."

"Delighted," said Jim. "Sorry I have to be toddling along."

"Good luck," said the girl, and waved her hand to him as he moved off.

That smile. It encouraged Jim in a manner that afterward seemed perfectly absurd. Just a girl who would be as willing to help the next runner as him—but one in a million for all that.

Jim could not get his thoughts off her. Gosh, but she was nice! Her sympathetic eyes, her pretty features, her slim athletic form, her modish dress—

"Like to meet her again, darned if I wouldn't," he thought. "No chance, though, I guess—unless I get up nerve enough to come back to call on her. Let's see, now — Sunnylawn — that's the name of her place. A few miles out of that last town. Darn it, why didn't I get the name of it? Oh, well. I can learn the name of the next burg and trace my way back from there."

He looked at her handkerchief that still was in his hand. Come to think of it, he had a handkerchief of his own, tucked away in a little pocket that he had sewed into his jersey one evening just to carry a handkerchief. It was odd that, in the excitement of meeting the girl, he had forgotten all about it.

"I'll keep hers for a souvenir," he said to himself, and started to tuck it into the pocket along with the handkerchief that was already there.

"No, the two of them make too much of a bump. I'll have to throw one of them away."

Which? His own was the bigger

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and more serviceable of the two, nevertheless he decided instantly to keep the girl's. He tossed his into a ditch and saw it flutter to the bottom. He tucked the girl's lacy affair into his pocket and whipped up his pace as he thought of the better prospect he would have of getting acquainted with the girl if he should turn out to be the winner.

He noticed that the black car still followed him, and he wondered if the occupants were smiling at him because of the obvious interest he had shown in a mere roadside spectator who perhaps was already assisting some other runner.

He decided that she did not know the running game very well or she would not have offered sandwiches. No runner would dare eat anything so substantial until the day's task was done.

Jim realized after awhile that thoughts of the unknown girl had driven out of his mind for the time being the picture of his old sweetheart, Mary Summerville. He speculated as to which of the two girls he liked best, and felt a bit foolish when he realized that the unknown one interested him far more than did Mary.

"Crazy in the head," he said to himself. "That's the way your thoughts can wonder when you've got nothing to think about."

When the field finished that afternoon, Jim found that he had made a greater gain upon the two men ahead of him than in any previous day. Santini and Smith were still ahead, but his hope of overtaking them was far brighter now than it ever had been.

"And Miss Unknown is responsible for part, at least, of my fine showing to-day," he said to himself.

VIII.

Two days later Jim worked into second place. Smith was passed, but the ex-amateur champion, Santini, still retained his lead in elapsed time, though not in daily performance, since Jim beat him to the control station each day as regularly as an hour hand points to twelve o'clock.

If only he had trained for the race, or, since he had not, if only he had exerted himself a little more at the start! Jim realized now that his inexperience in long distance running had caused him to nurse his strength too carefully.

First, he had not intended to complete the race, and therefore had loafed at the start; second, it was only recently that he had run himself "into the ground," as the saying was, every day.

In a way he was thankful that the inhabitants of his home town back in Ohio had given him a cool reception, since that had been a constant spur.

He knew that already their feeling toward him had changed. A telegram from his father wished him the best of luck, and there were other telegrams of encouragement from there too.

The one which really amused him was from Redgrass, California, the town which had disowned him as a representative and endeavored to accelerate his progress with shots fired at his feet. Now Redgrass was proud to claim him as its own, the telegram read, and was confident that its favorite son would bring it the honor of a world's championship.

News of his fine showing had spread all over the world. Now that the great race was nearing its finish, excitement was growing to fever heat. Temporarily it had eclipsed every other sporting event.

There were no more stretches of roadway upon which Jim could run with no one to see him except the occupants of one or two cars. Almost everywhere spectators lined the roadside.

There seemed to be not one of them who did not know his record in the race, not one who did not appreciate the tremendous odds he had overcome in pulling up from the rear to second place, with a promise of overhauling

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the leader before New York was reached.

Jim still felt that he could do it. He got a very bad scare one day when he gained only three minutes and ten seconds on Santini. At that rate he never could catch him. The man must be getting stronger.

Next day Jim ran as he never had before. He finished in a more exhausted condition than he ever had, but he had the satisfaction of learning that he had gained nearly twenty minutes, and that only eighteen more remained to be gained.

Next day he gained eight more—not bad, but not good, either, when one considered that the following day would take him right to the finish in New York City.

Ten minutes had to be gained in order to equal Santini's elapsed time record, more in order to be declared the winner.

So great an effort did he make on the last day that thoughts of everything else were swept from Jim's mind. He carried a watch on his wrist for the first time; he marked on a chart each town that he was to pass, with the distance from one to the other, together with a table of the time at which he would have to enter each in order to reach the finish sufficiently ahead of Santini to be declared the winner—provided the latter ran no faster than he had recently, which was by no means certain.

Jim conferred with the referee on the evening before the final dash of forty-two miles was to be run. He asked for a car to be driven ahead of him all the way to clear the track, and was told that this had already been arranged for, as well as police supervision of the last few miles, where the crowds would be thickest.

He started on the morning of the last day resolved to win or drop in his tracks. Dashing off at the crack of the gun, he soon had gained a lead on every other contestant.

He could not glance back at the next man, as he had been able to do for many miles along the course. The crowds everywhere were too thick, even along stretches of farming country outside the metropolis.

He received a continuous ovation, but that did not help him. He could have enjoyed it, he thought, if victory would be assured him merely by finishing first, but such was far from being the case. He had to finish ten minutes and seventeen seconds ahead of Santini merely to tie the man, more than that in order to beat him.

No one passed him. It did not matter greatly if some one had, provided the person was not Santini.

He kept glancing at his wrist watch as he passed the various points he had noted on his chart. He did not carry the chart because he did not need to. Everything he had jotted down with a pencil was inscribed with equal clearness on his memory.

Cars bothered him more than ever, there was no one to act as pacemaker; he just had to grit his teeth and keep plodding through the cheering mobs at the fastest possible gait.

He entered the city limits, whipped up his pace to the very fastest he could stand, increased it almost to a sprint as the huge grandstand of the baseball park loomed before him.

The roar of the crowds was continuous now. They called him a winner, but Jim knew that such was not necessarily the case.

Once Jim asked a man in the official car that was being driven ahead of him how far Santini was behind him, but the man could not tell him. Nobody could. Jim had no idea whether he was winning or losing.

He entered the ball park and circled a staked-out track and finished the great coast-to-coast race at a sprinter's pace—but that was not the end of it for him. He still did not know whether he had won or lost.

He wanted to wait for Santini at

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the finish, but he figured that such action would not look exactly right. The crowd would know what was in his mind—that he was hoping Santini would not finish in time—and Jim did not want to give them the impression that he was wishing a competitor bad luck.

He did not wish Santini bad luck either, merely hoped that his own performance had been good enough to bring him victory.

Jim sat tensely in front of the clubhouse, counting the minutes and seconds on his wrist watch, eyes glued on the gate through which the second man would come.

Five minutes—and there was the second man. Jim gasped. To be beaten like that. It was tough.

But the second man was not Santini. It didn't matter what his time was. Jim was too far head of him for that.

A third man. Santini? No. Jim breathed again. A queer way to win or lose a race, he thought—sitting quietly and watching his rivals come staggering along to the finish, some so exhausted it was all they could do to keep going to the tape.

Santini!

Jim noted the time. Nine minutes since he himself had finished. If Santini could reach the tape in less than one minute and seventeen seconds he would win the race. Breathlessly Jim watched him as he flung his last ounce of energy into the task.

He couldn't do it.

Fifty yards from the tape Santini realized that he could not and fell flat on his face. It was rather pitiful. He lay like a log; no one daring to touch him because if any one did he would be disqualified. He struggled to his feet at last and walked, with many lurches this way and that, to the finish line.

All over.

Jim was the winner!

For three hours more competitors would come staggering in—the whole hundred and twenty-five who still remained in the race, less than half the number that had started—but so far as first and second places were concerned the greatest race that ever had been run was at an end.

When Jim appeared in his street clothes, which had reached the clubhouse ahead of him on a truck, he was cheered as he never in his life had heard any one cheered. The triumph that had been his when he won an intercollegiate amateur championship was nothing compared to this.

And the "gold" medal he had won on that long-past occasion was as nothing compared with the check for thirty thousand dollars which was presented to him, at a great banquet that evening.

Then the perquisites. Two vaudeville contracts for long tours were offered him and he signed the better one. Six offers for his personal story of the race were made, and he accepted the best of those, dictating his impressions to a newspaper man who did the actual writing.

He said very little about the humiliating passage through his home town and nothing at all about the wayside girl who had handed him a drink of water.

And yet that unknown girl stuck in Jim's mind. Could he ever meet her again? Did she know that he had won? Probably she knew that a certain James Gordon had won, but how could she tell that he was James Gordon? Even if she could, did she care? She must have handed water to dozens of other competitors.

Jim wondered if she would see his photograph, which was being published in newspapers everywhere, and if so, whether she would recollect that it was he who had passed her first.

A whole day of triumph followed the day of the finish. Everywhere Jim went he was followed by crowds.

He did not go out much, however. He was busy rehearsing the vaudeville sketch which had been provided for him—for him and a young lady so

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charming that he surely must have become interested in her were it not for the fact that he could not forget the other charmer whom he had passed at a place called Sunnylawn.

He did not see the Sunnylawn girl and did not hear from her. Worst of all, his vaudeville engagement would occupy his time for the next two months to such an extent that he could not look her up.

Thus passed the time until only a few hours intervened before Jim was to make his first appearance on the vaudeville stage—and then came a blow that staggered him more than anything ever had in his whole lifetime.

A young man named Gerald Heming, who was described in the newspaper article as the physical counterpart of the coast-to-coast winner, made the astounding charge that Jim had won the race by cheating, that he himself had taken Jim's place in the race for a whole day!

IX.

JIM'S vaudeville engagement was suspended immediately and he was compelled to face the race officials along with the man who had made the charge against him.

At this meeting Heming was ordered to repeat his story in detail. The fellow rose in the humble manner of one who has sinned and is repentant, and Jim marveled at the cool manner in which he repeated his charge.

Only too well did Jim grasp the purpose of the scoundrelly Heming. A tremendous amount of money had been wagered on the race. Fortunes had been lost on the favorite, Santini, and the losers were willing to do anything at all in order to recover their money, which they would do, and win huge sums as well, if Jim Gordon were disqualified.

Heming had got into touch with some of those people, and together they had rigged up this nefarious scheme to deprive Jim of his victory. Heming would naturally be well repaid for making his false confession of crookedness.

Asked to recount everything that he knew, Heming began by telling how he had visited Jim in his tent with a proposition to substitute for him. He spoke so convincingly and with such a wealth of detail that he made a considerable impression. He said that Jim accepted the proposition and it was put into effect a few days later.

Questioned regarding this alleged transaction, Jim told the plain truth, how Heming had proposed such substitution to him and he had declined to consider it.

Ordered to tell just how he had substituted for Jim, Heming proceeded to do so.

"It was on a Monday, the day the race started from a town called Valence. It was a nice clear cool day, though it grew hotter in the afternoon. Gordon commenced the race. I was in a closed black car, attired in a running suit that looked just like Gordon's.

"I sat in the back of our car with a blanket around me and the curtains pulled down, and at the wheel there was a friend of mine who is present to back up my story."

Heming indicated another man—the very fellow whom Jim had observed at the wheel of the black car which trailed him on the day he started from Valence.

"Gordon ran past the water tower at the edge of town," Heming went on, "and continued up the hill, because he didn't think it advisable to let me run for him until we got over the top, where there was no one around to notice the substitution. The car slowed up, he slipped in, and I slipped out. To make myself look more natural I picked up some dust and sprinkled it over my suit.

"From that point until very near the finish for the day I did the running—much faster, naturally, than Gordon could have because I was fresh, as is

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proved by the fact that Gordon made his greatest gain on the time-scoring sheet that day."

Heming was asked to detail any incidents that had occurred along the road.

"I kept running along, looking at the nice fields on either side to amuse myself," he stated, "and pretty soon I was in another town called Burlingville. No one got wise to the fact that I wasn't Gordon, as we knew they wouldn't because we look so much alike.

"Going out of Burlingville a yellow car started off ahead of me. It kicked up so much dust that I asked the driver to get behind me and he did so.

"Pretty soon I passed a big puddle in the road, and just then the yellow car came swishing past and splashed me with mud. I didn't care, because the more mud I got on me the more like a coast-to-coast runner I would look.

"I guess it was an hour before I hit another town, but there was a thing happened there that I remember fine. In front of a barber shop a man offered me a drink of water from a milk bottle. I wouldn't drink it, but I poured some down my neck because the day was getting hot and so was I.

"Soon I asked a man how far I had to go to the control station and he told me.

"Well, I kept plodding along for a long time, getting hotter and more thirsty every minute, and after awhile there was a girl by the roadside who offered me a drink from a pail of water she had set up on a bench. I took it and thanked her and kept plugging along. She was rather a good-looking girl. I drank some because I wasn't afraid that she would try to dope me."

Jim Gordon tensed at mention of the unknown girl whom he longed to see again. It was great luck, he thought, that the crook had chosen that day to give his false account of what had happened to him—the things that really had happened to Jim, which Heming observed because undoubtedly he was concealed in the black car which had followed Jim that day.

"I kept running along for some distance farther," Heming went on, "doing the best I could because I wanted to make up as much of Gordon's lost time as I could. With two or three miles to go we switched places again, I ducking into the car and Gordon ducking out—so quickly that even had some one been watching from a nearby field he might have been deceived.

"Gordon checked in at the control station and, of course, got credit for making the full run of nearly fifty miles that day—and that's the real reason, gentlemen, that he beat the second man's elapsed time into New York."

The officials seemed impressed, as well they might be, since Heming had related his story in a very convincing manner.

"Did you impersonate Gordon any day thereafter?" he was asked.

"No. Gordon got scared that some one would get wise. I wanted to take his place again, but he said the spectators were getting too plentiful and we'd better take no more chances, that he'd rather make sure of second money than risk losing everything."

Jim was then called upon to make any rebuttal that he could. He told the plain truth about what had happened that day, as well as he could remember, and then Heming's chauffeur was called.

This fellow corroborated everything that Heming said. The officials conferred and asked Jim if he could produce any one who could verify his story, as the chauffeur had Heming's.

"The girl who handed me a drink of water that day might be able to identify me," he said. "It's doubtful, since she never saw me before and this liar does look like me, but at least we could call on her."

"How can we if you don't know her name?"

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"I know the name of the place where she lives—Sunnylawn—and its approximate location."

"We'll get her if we can."

Jim was told that payment on his winner's check had been stopped, and that if he should try to disappear he would be arrested. He would be called again as soon as the girl could be brought face to face with him—if her testimony could be secured at all, which was by no means certain.

"I wonder if she'll recognize me," thought Jim. "Don't see how she can when she never saw me before, and that crook looks so much like me—but you never can tell."

He was tremendously thrilled when, two days later, he was ordered to report before the officials again, at which time the girl would be present to declare whether it was Heming or Jim to whom she had handed the drink of water.

X.

JIM was thrilled again by the sight of the girl whom he had longed to see ever since he passed her that day on the road. Her appearance was even more engaging now than it had been then, her good nature was evidenced by her immediate response to the committee's invitation to appear and identify the man to whom she had handed the dipper of water.

Her name proved to be Irene Borden and her family was a Boston one which maintained Sunnylawn as a summer home.

Jim did not flatter himself that she would be able to identify him at once. He realized that his appearance in street clothes must be considerably different from his appearance in running togs when he was covered with perspiration and begrimed from the dust of the roadway.

She must have watched all the runners go by and her mental picture of any particular one of them must have become blurred.

Face to face with Jim, she declared that he was the man who passed her. That was fine, but Jim's hope of immediate vindication faded when she faced Heming and admitted that she could not tell for sure whether he or Jim was the man.

The officials conferred and then summoned Heming to answer more questions.

"You have already stated," said one of them to Heming, "that when you approached this young lady you asked her for a drink. Is that correct?"

Heming recognized this as a trap and was too smart to fall into it.

"That isn't what I said," he replied. "I said that she offered me a drink and I accepted it."

Miss Borden was asked if it was she who had spoken first, and she admitted that it was.

"Then what did you say?" Heming was asked.

"I thanked her."

"And just ran on without having any further conversation?"

Heming had evidently been raking his memory for every incident that he had observed as occurring between the girl and Jim, for he replied:

"When you questioned me about this young lady before, I merely replied that she offered me a drink and I took it and thanked her. I thought that was all that was important; so I didn't bother with further details. As a matter of fact, there was a little more than that.

"I wanted a handkerchief to dip in the water and wash my face with and she gave me hers."

Jim was disappointed. He had hoped that the scoundrel in the car had not observed the handkerchief incident.

"You asked her for one?" queried the official.

Heming hesitated and Jim hoped he was going to make the wrong reply. He knew that Heming would have to guess. He could not very well have

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learned whether the handkerchief had been offered or asked for. He knew by the expression on Heming's face that the fellow was trying to guess the correct reply.

To Jim's consternation his guess was correct.

"I asked her for it," he replied, "though I don't exactly remember what words I used."

The girl admitted that he had.

"Then what? Did you return her handkerchief when you finished using it?"

Jim hung on the impostor's reply.

"No, I didn't."

"What did you do with it?"

Jim tensed; this was the critical point.

"I carried it for a short distance," said Heming, "and then I threw it away."

Jim jumped to his feet.

"That's where this crook is wrong!" he cried. "I didn't throw her handkerchief away. I kept it."

The official demanded: "Indeed! Why did you do that?"

Jim glanced at the girl.

"Why — er — I just wanted to. Thought I'd keep it as a souvenir. You see—er—well, I thought it was pretty nice of her to help me as she did."

Heming jumped to his feet with as much alacrity as Jim had.

"Rotten lies!" he protested. "I did throw her handkerchief away. Probably it's lying there in the ditch even yet. If you'll send some one to search for it I bet you'll find it."

Miss Borden corroborated this.

"I saw the runner whom I helped throw my handkerchief away. I didn't think it was very nice of him to do that."

Jim grinned. Things were coming his way at last.

The judge asked the girl: "Did you recover your handkerchief from the ditch, where the runner whom you assisted threw it?"

"No, I didn't."

Jim rose smiling.

"Gentlemen," he said, "this investigation is practically all over. I'm exonerated and Heming is proved to be a crook. I can prove absolutely that he is lying by means of the handkerchief which this young lady so kindly gave me."

He paused for a moment to let that sink in.

"I did throw a handkerchief away soon after I received the drink. Miss Borden saw me do that, and so did this scoundrel from his observation post in the car that followed me, but where both of them are mistaken is in this respect: The handkerchief that I discarded was my own, because I didn't have room in my pocket for both—and I've still got hers!"

"Can you prove that assertion?" demanded the judge. "Can you show the handkerchief?"

"Yes."

"Let's see it then. If Miss Borden can identify it as hers your assertion will be proved."

"It's at my hotel. Send a guard with me and I'll get it."

Jim did get it, and Miss Borden did identify it, and, just as Jim predicted, that closed the investigation. Heming was locked up on a charge of perjury, since his testimony had been given under oath, and later he was given the stiff jail sentence that he so richly deserved.

And as for Jim—

"I fell in love with you, Irene, the instant that I saw you," he said one evening across a dinner table in a secluded nook of a Broadway restaurant.

"That's interesting." And Irene smiled invitingly.

"I want you to marry me. Will you?"

If Jim expected a direct yes or no reply, he was disappointed.

"It 'll take me weeks and weeks to get ready," said Irene.

THE END

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Heartbreak Trail

A story of 1855, in which a young man leaves luxury to struggle amid the murders and arson of the Kansas border war

BY THE AUTHOR OF "EYES WEST!"

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

IN 1855 Senator Tristram sends his nephew Reuel on a private investigation to Kansas territory, where proslavery and antislavery men are then quarreling. Reuel defeats his rival Mark Rynders in their contest for the love of Miranda Reynolds, a Congressman's daughter; and is engaged to her before he travels West. There he becomes acquainted with a sturdy pioneer named Hubert Dawson, and a family named Leeds. The Leeds are all shiftless except the two youngest, Hector and Hetty. Reuel and Dawson ride to their aid when they hear four claim jumpers are at the farm. They find Hector shot by a man named Marcy, because he shot a ruffian named Upham who had struck Hetty. They had come with Lycurgus Braithwaite, a lawyer. Mark Rynders is the fourth, and he tries to arbitrate; but Marcy is too hot-headed and draws his revolver. Dawson draws also, but Reuel fires first.

CHAPTER VI *(Continued).*

THE INDISCRETION.

ELNATHAN MARCY stood still for an instant, then dropped his weapon and crashed to the ground like a felled tree. The blood was trickling from a hole in his forehead.

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for June 23

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"Murder!" shrieked Braithwaite, white with terror.

Rynders and Upham, in a panic, fumbled for their pistols.

"Hands up!" roared Hubert, covering them; and they obeyed.

"Get your horses," he ordered, "and ride fast! I don't want you to walk. Take that thing on the ground with you and show it to your friends. Tell 'em there'll be more of 'em just like that if they stay on this side o' the border."

The men obeyed his commands sullenly, menaced constantly with the long-barreled seven-shooter. He covered them alertly, while Reuel searched them and took away their weapons, then directed them in binding the dead man to his saddle with a rope.

"We'll return shortly," said Mark Rynders, as he mounted, "and there'll be a thousand with us. Marcy was a popular man. You'll be sorry you let his friends see the body."

"You get going!" said Hubert. "Make some speed, all of you, or I'll take that rifle and begin shooting when you get to the knoll."

The disarmed, defeated men were out of sight in a moment, and the two victors turned toward the house.

Hetty leaned against the door post, dull-eyed now and bewildered. The butt of her rifle rested on the ground, and her fingers held the barrel loosely.

"Hector's going to die!" she moaned, more in soliloquy than open complaint. "It had to be him—the only decent one!"

"Let's see Hector," said Hubert, dismounting and hurrying to the house, followed by Reuel.

The weeping and moaning inside went on drearily, and as the two men entered, the hysterical Rosa leaped to her feet with a wild shriek.

"Be still, woman!" cried Hubert sternly. "That's the least you can do to help."

He went quickly to the couch, where they had placed Hector. Mrs. Leeds was weeping and bathing her son's head with cologne water, in utterly futile devotion.

The old grandmother, equally futile, was preparing a bread-and-onion poultice at the fire, mumbling incoherently as she worked.

The boy was semiconscious. His eyes were open, and he stared at the two men without apparent recognition. The distracted mother could not control him, and he tossed restlessly on the couch, moaning in pain, while his breath came stertorously.

Hubert found the bullet hole at the top of the chest near the right shoulder.

"It didn't come out, you see," he said to Reuel, as he made a careful examination. "We'll have to get Dr. Vincent right away, or somebody else. I'll stay here while you ride to town."

"Get his father, too," requested Mrs. Leeds. "Eustace ought to be here now."

"What for?" asked Hubert without much compassion. "We can't stop to look for your man, Mrs. Leeds; he's probably hiding in the woods with your son-in-law."

"You lie!" yelled Rosa. "Justus has gone to bring help."

"Shut up!" shouted Hubert so fiercely that she obeyed.

Reuel hurried out to his horse, and he found Hetty mounting guard again. She stood erect, her face hard and grim.

"I'll do the shooting this time, if they come back," she said.

CHAPTER VII.

THE HOSTAGE.

HARD as Reuel rode for the doctor, the news of the killing of Elnathan Marcy reached Lawrence ahead of him, though the men with the body did not pass through the town. The pickets passed him through their lines with cheers, and cheers

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greeted him in the streets; but Luther Roberts was one of the first to halt him, and the older man's face was as grave as Reuel's.

"I choose to believe it was a clear case of self-defense, Tristram," he said. "You're not excitable, you never pick quarrels; you're about the last man that I'd expect to get into serious trouble like that. But General Robinson is angry and worried. He thinks you should be arrested and tried for murder at once."

"It was self-defense," asserted Reuel. "I was not calm; I may have acted somewhat impulsively; but Marcy drew on me, and I fired. There was no deliberate aim; I fired at him with every intention of hitting him, but I didn't want to kill him."

"A man named Rynders told one of the men at our outpost that it was a brutal murder," said Roberts. "He declared that Marcy ordered you away from the Leeds place, and you shot him before he had a chance to draw and defend himself."

"Rynders has no love for me," Reuel explained. "We knew each other in Washington. I might tell *you*, Mr. Roberts, that we were rivals for a time. He was a suitor of the lady that is now my fiancée."

"I shall explain that to General Robinson, Tristram; it will help."

"He lies when he says I fired before Marcy drew. I'll confess to you, Mr. Roberts, that I shall always be troubled by the thought that he was bluffing me—that he counted on my putting up my hands and yielding.

"But a man scarcely stops to consider another's thoughts when a gun is pointed at him. I saw his gun in his hand, then I caught the flash of Hubert Dawson's gun barrel as he yanked it out, and I knew there was going to be shooting. Marcy's dead, and the thing can't be done over again."

"If you told that story before a fair jury," remarked Roberts, "and your witnesses bore out your statements, there'd be precious little sympathy for the victim.

"In this region, if a man has his gun in his hand and gets shot, he's considered fair game for the one that got him. To fire a second too late, or not to fire at all—that's of the nature of a crime, and betrays weakness unbecoming to a man."

"I shall give myself up, if they wish to arrest me," said Reuel, "but I want to get back to the Leeds place with Dr. Vincent first of all. Marcy shot young Hector Leeds, and he may die."

"Turn back, before too many people see you here," Roberts instructed him. "Ride out toward the Leeds place slowly, and I'll overtake you with Vincent. We returned only an hour ago ourselves, and he's at the hotel. I'll have a talk with General Robinson this evening about you. At a time like this, with guerrilla warfare all around us, there shouldn't be too much quibbling over a shooting affray; but Robinson is hoping to keep down disorder and patch up some kind of a peace."

Half an hour later Reuel, joined on the road by Roberts and the doctor, returned to the log cabin.

The conditions there had been aggravated by the return of Eustace and Justus.

The latter met the party at the door and made a blustering effort to reject their aid.

"You're not welcome here, Tristram," he said. "We can take care of our own sick. You've made trouble enough for us, killing a man and making a lot of new enemies for us. I want Mr. Roberts to get this Dawson feller out of our house, too; he's no fit company for ladies, and he refuses to get out at the request of a gentleman."

A vigorous kick from the rear, administered by the powerful Hubert, shot Justus through the door and into Reuel's arms. Reuel, in turn, flung the man from him, sending him spinning

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across the yard to crash into the wood pile.

Rosa, in the house, shrieked and fainted. Mrs. Leeds and the grandmother wailed dismally and fell to renewed weeping. From the chimney corner came sonorous sobs and deep groans of profound masculine grief. Eustace had fortified himself against the prevailing woe with liberal potations, and his professions of sorrow were taking on an heroic quality.

"It might be better for the patient if we could have a little less caterwauling here!" said Dr. Vincent sharply as he entered. "If I were wounded and sick here myself, I'd prefer death to life."

The women stifled their sobs indignantly, but Eustace comprehended the rebuke imperfectly, the idea of life and death being the only thing that his muddled brain received, and he gave vent to a series of noble howls appropriate to the lamentations of a giant.

Young Hetty flew at him in a rage and shook him.

"He means you!" she cried. "Shut up! Or get out to the horse shed and stay there!"

"Merciful Heaven!" gasped Mrs. Leeds in her horror. "What's come over everybody? Back home we always had such a quiet, refined family! It's associating with all the rag-tag-an'-bobtail that's done it!"

Vincent examined the boy quickly, almost roughly, with the brisk efficiency of the capable surgeon. He undid his kit of instruments, and probed for the bullet, while Reuel and Luther Roberts held the writhing, groaning patient and the women muttered angry protests.

"Poulticin' would 'a' done well enough," sniffled the old woman. "I had a brother, got shot in Mexico, an' the bullet's still in 'im doin' no harm. This 'ere doctorin's what kills folks; 'tain't bullets."

"There it is, if you want it!" snapped the surgeon a moment later, flipping the ball of lead onto the floor. "You might wear it for a charm against rheumatism and gout.

"I think your brother will get well," he added, turning to Hetty with a certain brusque deference. "There's no great harm done, and he's young and robust. If the fever lets up, and pneumonia doesn't set in—why—but we ought to get him out of this place. I'd like to move him in a wagon to the hotel in town."

"Pardon me, doc, but I wouldn't advise it," objected Roberts. "General Robinson is hopeful, but he admits there may be a general attack within the next twenty-four hours, and the hotel will get the brunt of it. They think most of the arms are stored there, and Sheriff Jones has said that he'd raid the place and burn it if he got into Lawrence with his men."

"All right; this will have to do, then," said Vincent with a shrug. He measured out some medicine and gave Hetty instructions for its use.

Darkness had fallen, and the chill of the night caused the women to pile sticks on the fire, close the door tightly, and put up the shutters at the unglazed window openings.

Suddenly Hubert Dawson glided swiftly across the room and flung the heavy wooden bar across the door, securing it in the iron brackets. He put his ear to the crack and listened, signaling to the others to be quiet.

"Somebody's talking out there," he whispered presently.

He jumped back involuntarily as three sharp knocks shook the door.

"What's wanted?" challenged Roberts.

"Young Tristram's wanted," was the answer. "Chuck 'im out here, and we'll leave the house alone."

"Some mistake," called Roberts. "Dr. Vincent and I are here trying to save the life of a wounded boy. This is Luther Roberts speaking; I'm an official aid to General Robinson at Lawrence. Tristram lives at the hotel. If

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you cause a disturbance here, this boy may die."

"One abolitionist less!" jeered the speaker outside. "Don't try to make off like Tristram isn't there; we know he just went in. He's got to go to jail at Lecompton, unless he prefers a rope right here. There's a tree right handy out here, and we've got the rope."

"It's that rat of a Justus!" whispered Hetty. "He told them."

"Tell them I'll come out," said Reuel. "They'll break the door down in a minute."

"But you won't go out, Reuel!" declared Hubert. "Not while I'm here to stop you. That jail business is a bluff. Open the door, and you'll be shot to pieces. That's Braithwaite doing the talking."

"Keep it shut, and we may all be shot," said Reuel.

"Make up your mind one way or 'nother, Roberts," warned the voice. "I'm a deputy sheriff, and I stand for the law, but there's about a dozen gents here that don't want any foolin'. They are losin' patience."

Another voice was heard.

"Get the horses out o' that shed and set it afire; we need some light."

"Don't do that!" shouted Reuel. "This is Tristram speaking. I'm coming out."

"Come on then—and no tricks about it!"

Hubert, cursing softly, got out his seven-shooter.

"It's a fight, then," he muttered.

"Keep talking, there at the door," Reuel whispered. "I'm going to drop out the back window. I may get away."

Hetty laid a trembling hand on his arm.

"Don't do it, Mr. Tristram!" she implored. "We're all in this. You wouldn't be here, if it wasn't for Hector. Let 'em break in, if they've got the spunk. We'll all fight. And they won't leave us alone, even if you do go out."

"My dear girl," he said gently, "I am trying to fix it so they'll all go away. If they're not watching the window, I may get to my horse in the dark, and we'll have a race. They can't shoot me without any light, and my horse will beat them to the town line."

"Time's up!" growled the man outside. "Open that door an' come on out, or shall we come in?"

"There are several gents here, sitting up with the sick man," replied Hubert. "We're trying to have peace and quiet, but open that door and you will think the battle o' Buena Vista's broke loose again. Mr. Tristram is dressing to appear properly in your midst."

"Tristram's coming out under my official protection," said Roberts, stepping close to the door, to make conversation while Reuel tried to effect an escape. "I'm turning him over to *you,* Mr. Deputy Sheriff, and I hold you responsible for him under the law."

"Come on, while he talks," said Hubert, moving toward the rear window. "Slide out quick. Hetty will shut the window up and fasten it."

"You mustn't come, Hubert," Reuel said. "I know what your friendship is, but I'll stand a better chance alone. One man is harder to find in the dark than two. You're needed right here, and it's likely that most of the trouble will be here. If I get clean away they will turn to the house for revenge. I'm asking you to stay here and take care of this family."

Hubert objected obstinately, but the younger man's reasoning prevailed. It was Hubert, then, who noiselessly slipped the bar from the heavy shutter and opened it a finger's breadth, to peer into the velvety darkness and listen for sounds of watchers in that quarter.

"No signs of 'em," he reported in a whisper, "yet you may drop into their arms. You've got to chance it."

Reuel had a fear of sentimentality. He attempted no leavetaking, but nod-

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ded to Hetty and Hubert in turn, smiling slightly, then stepped on a chair, thrust his foot through a narrow opening, raised himself cautiously over the sill, and dropped into the long grass.

"No tricks, Reuel!" Hubert whispered softly, leaning from the window. "Your job is to get away. We'll take care of things here."

Reuel stood up and took his revolver in his hand. He heard Hubert slide the bar over the shutter as he closed it. Then he heard voices raised in angry altercation at the front of the house.

"Fetch that log here!" yelled a man. "Open up this rat trap and let's see what's goin' on."

Reuel crept to the corner and slipped along the side of the cabin. At the front corner he peered cautiously toward the door, but it was too dark to make out even the figures of the men whose voices were so audible.

He could hear shuffling, stamping feet, and low growls and curses, and all at once he cried out:

"Here I am! Tristram! Come and get me!"

On the last word he turned and darted back, around the cabin, and then across an open space to the horse shed. The pack was in full cry. By the shouts and clomping of heavy boots, there was a sizable mob. They rounded the cabin after him, then seemed to spread out at the rear of it, threshing about in the tall dry grass, bumping into one another and quarreling.

He stole along the back of the shed and suddenly stumbled upon a man that was crouching there.

The man grunted and flung his arms about Reuel's legs. Reuel grabbed for a hold, to keep his balance. His fingers found a collar and gripped it at the throat. It was a stiff collar, and there was a mop of soft neckcloth at the front of it. Justus Godfrey was one of the few men around there that had a linen collar and a silken scarf.

Keeping his hold, with his left hand, Reuel raised his revolver by the barrel and brought the butt crashing down on the man's head. The arms that were wrapped about his knees gave way and the man collapsed.

The scuffle, however, was heard, and the hunt stormed toward the shed. Somebody fell over the stunned man, and there was a rush to that point, while Reuel darted into the open field beyond the shed.

"It's only that Godfrey skunk!" he heard a man say contemptuously.

The pack scattered about the shed and deployed into the field. Reuel crouched in the grass, listening intently for every sound, hoping that he could find a chance to get to his own horse in the yard, or take one from the shed.

In the darkness a tiny spark glimmered and went out, then another. He heard the tapping of flint and steel. He crept farther off into the field and lay down in the grass.

A flame grew out of the next spark, and it wavered for a moment in the gentle wind, then leaped up and spread into a fan. There was a faint crackling and hissing. Two figures were outlined in the light, and presently the glow spread about them like a nimbus, and long tongues of fire reached out, caught fresh material, and expanded.

The haystack, fifty feet beyond the shed, was on fire, and in an instant the light flashed to the tree tops and illuminated the whole scene about the cabin.

Eyes relieved ears of their duty, and the fugitive lay low and counted fourteen men that were hunting him. They were eager hounds, and they darted hither and thither, threshing the grass, peering into the shadows, cursing their quarry for giving them so much trouble.

Most of them were strangers to him, but he discovered the tall hat and black coat of Lycurgus Braithwaite and made out the short, squat figure of Noah Upham, who aspired to the ownership of

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the Leeds place. Then, as he watched alertly, Mark Rynders passed through the zone of light, enabling him to account for all the members of the raiding party of the afternoon.

The hunters were quick to grow impatient, and the ruffians that Braithwaite had evidently picked up at the Wakarusa camp began to grumble and demand an attack on the house.

Reuel feared such a development and expected it, and he hoped that the burning attack might alarm the people in Lawrence and bring help from the armed force there; but he recalled General Robinson's decree that the settlers in the outskirts must take refuge in the town or look out for themselves and their property without expecting aid from him.

Braithwaite grew weary of walking and got his horse from the herd of mounts tethered in front of the cabin. He mounted and directed the search from the saddle, riding up and down and traversing the lighted area in all directions.

"Don't give up," he counseled the impatient ones. "He's hiding here; he wouldn't 'a' started off to go far without a hawse."

He turned and rode into the taller grass, and suddenly headed directly toward the concealed fugitive.

Inspiration seized Reuel, and he rose up with a bound and thrust his revolver into Braithwaite's face.

"Put up your hands!" he ordered sharply.

Then Reuel caught him by the arm and dragged him quickly from the saddle. The skittish horse shied and went prancing away, and Reuel held the man in front of him and pressed the muzzle of his revolver into the back of his neck.

"Now, send them all away!" he commanded. "If they care anything about you, they'll go. Tell them to get their horses and ride for home, and if they don't do it I'm going to blow your head off, Braithwaite. You're a hostage here, and you'll remain."

The deputy sheriff protested, trembling with fear.

"You don't know these men," he said. "They're desperate; my life ain't anything to 'em. You can murder me, for all they'll care, but they'll get you then, and they'll burn you alive."

"I'm chancing that," Reuel replied. "Tell them to go and get Sheriff Jones at the camp—that he must bring a military force. Show your authority if you want to live."

The men were yelling like Indians now. Some of them had seen the capture of their leader, and were calling the others and moving toward him.

Reuel shouted to them:

"Stay back! If any man comes within fifty feet, I'll blow this man's brains out."

They howled in rage and savage derision, and kept moving forward.

"Stay back, boys!" ordered Braithwaite, his voice quavering. "Ride for the camp. Tell 'em I'm captured and Tristram says he's going to shoot me."

Noah Upham pushed through the advancing group, arguing frantically, trying to restrain them. Evidently he was Braithwaite's friend, and he implored the ruffians to temporize and employ strategy.

Reuel's eyes searched for Mark Rynders, the gay adventurer, but he was nowhere in sight, and his absence was disquieting.

The mob still came on, spreading out, but it moved slowly as Upham persisted in his appeal for the safety of his friend.

"Go—go back, men!" faltered Braithwaite, in an agony of suspense. "If you rush this man and—I—I'm shot, you'll be held responsible."

All at once the slow advance wavered and some of the men halted. Reuel noticed that they were staring at him in the flickering firelight with a new and peculiar interest, some of them grinning and muttering in fiendish good humor. He was puzzled, disquieted, by the change in the general demeanor.

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A bludgeon descended on his head like a thunderbolt, and he crashed to the ground at Braithwaite's feet, his revolver exploding in the air.

Mark Rynders, crafty and treacherous, had flanked him, crept up from the rear, and struck him down with a pistol butt.

CHAPTER VIII.

OF MICE AND MEN.

AS consciousness returned slowly to the stricken Reuel, he sensed vaguely a world of pain and discomfort. His head seemed prodigiously swollen, and it throbbed and hurt him cruelly. He was shivering with chills, and his clothing was wet and clammy.

"Give 'im another bucket o' water," said a man near him. "He's comin' to."

An icy flood dashed over him, taking his breath away, but the rude prescription was not without effect. Realization of his predicament seemed to come with sharpened senses, and he knew that the tables had turned upon him.

"I still think, gents, that we'd do better to go careful," another man was saying, and Reuel recalled the voice of Noah Upham.

"There's no good, nor no harm, whichever way we go," argued a dissenter. "This here's war, now, and there's nothin' to be careful about. The politicians at Washington will settle things sooner or later, an' we'll all be just about where we started from; that's the way things work."

"That ain't so far from my way of thinking, either," returned the conciliatory Upham. "But it looks like you want to hurry up the folks at Washington. You hang this young rooster here, and—mark my words!—there'll be a special session o' Congress about it.

"You can go out an' shoot a town all to pieces an' kill off a couple o' hundred men, and them Senators and Congressmen won't hear about it, seems like; but you jes' go hurt one of their kinfolks, or interfere with their own personal business, and you're goin' to be sorry, believe me!"

"Upham's got it right!" seconded Braithwaite. "I represent the law, and I'm always for letting the law take its course."

"Let the right kind of law take its course, then," spoke up a young man. "We've got a right proper jury here, ready for business. Elnathan Marcy was kin o' mine, and I want justice done 'im.

"Put this feller in jail, and next thing that 'll happen, there'll be orders from Washington to turn 'im over to the Federal authorities. Then we'll never hear any more about the case. His uncle will tell 'im to behave himself and stay out o' Kansas, and they'll give him a political job to keep him busy."

There was a flutter of applause for the speech, and another member of the mob came forward.

"Look a-here, Braithwaite," he said roughly, "you was the man that said to bring along a rope. Was you aimin' to bluff us that-away? Here's the rope right here, an' there's a dozen of us hankerin' to use it.

"If you an' Upham have got weak stomachs, you can go on home an' leave us to finish the job. Mr. Rynders is a big feller in Washington, an' I take notice he ain't saying nothing; he knows when it's time to quit foolin' around an' doin' nothing."

"I've been trained to obey and respect the law," said Mark Rynders, while Reuel listened to his words intently, "but men have to use their own best judgment sometimes. We're on the frontier, boys, and there are times when the only way to get justice is to take it."

A roar of applause greeted so sympathetic an utterance, and two of the ruffians caught Reuel by the arms and jerked him to his feet.

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"Playin' possum, at that!" jeered one of them. "He's been all right this long time."

The captive staggered and swayed, but braced himself and stood erect. Something snapped in the air, hit his head lightly, then slipped down over his face and encircled his neck. It was the noose of the rope that had been recommended, and a playful jerk tightened it till it chafed his neck and restricted his breathing slightly.

"I protest, gents!" cried Braithwaite. "I want every man here to take notice that I object to this. It's against the law and against my orders, and I'll appear in court to convict every one o' you, when the time comes."

"Me, too!" declared Upham. "I want to see that feller strung up on a regular gallows, in the jail yard, with a regular sheriff springing the trap. But you all hear that I don't hold with no lynch law."

"Your nerve has given out, that's all!" exclaimed Mark Rynders contemptuously. "You two men were ready enough to go claim jumping, and didn't mind a fight if it had to come, but the picture of Senator Tristram has scared you like a jack-o'-lantern.

"He's only one of a whole lot of wax figures over in Washington, and they're only men. I've got a cousin in Congress myself, and I'm acquainted with the whole lot of 'em; that's why you don't see me getting scared."

"You talked a whole lot different this afternoon, young man," said Braithwaite indignantly.

"Well, what if I did?" sneered Rynders. "I've studied law myself. This afternoon I wanted to help this poor fool here, just because I've known him for some time. Now, I'm through with him, out of patience with him; he's a meddler and he can't keep his nose out of any one's business. Whoever puts him out of the way will do a good job!"

"We're the boys to do it!" yelled a delighted Missourian, and the ruffians pressed forward, swarming about the captive.

"Wait till I shin that ol' cottonwood," proposed a youth gleefully; "then you-all throw me the rope."

"You got anything to say—any word to send your uncle, down to Washington?" inquired one of the men, assuming a mocking judicial dignity.

"I've nothing to say—here," answered Reuel thickly, trying to resist the constriction of the rope by expanding his neck muscles. "I'd tell a court the truth—that it was a fair fight. Marcy drew first, and I shot him in self-defense. But that means nothing here."

"You're right, it don't!" cried the self-appointed master of ceremonies. "Don't mean no more than any other pack o' lies you could tell.

"Sling up that rope there!" he added, with a commanding gesture.

The free end of the rope was coiled lightly and tossed to the young man who had climbed to one of the lower branches of the cottonwood. He reached for it, grinning with elation, but his eager hand was not destined to catch it.

A rifle cracked from the door of the cabin, and the youth pitched headlong from the tree and lay huddled on the ground.

It was a small mob, but the wild, fierce yell that went up might have come from an army.

The frenzy that followed the shooting amounted almost to panic. Men ran helter-skelter in all directions; some of them dashed recklessly toward the house, firing their pistols at its log walls in futile fury; some turned with mad rage upon the captive, menacing him with guns and knives.

"Settle that fellow first!" shouted Mark Rynders. "Can't be more than two or three men in the house. Make sure of him—then we'll do for the fellers in there."

The ruffians rallied to him as a leader. They stormed back to the cotton-

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wood, and half a dozen of them scrambled and fought to get the rope. Reuel was jerked from his feet in the scrimmage, and his face turned red and purple as the noose was tightened with every pull at the rope.

The door of the cabin burst open, and Roberts, Vincent and Dawson leaped out, firing revolvers into the mob.

The ruffians instantly returned a rattling fire and brought Hubert down before he had emptied his seven-shooter.

Roberts and Vincent threw themselves behind the breastwork of the wood pile and fired with careful aim, trying to pick off the men nearest them without waste of ammunition.

The mob closed in on the wood pile, braving the fire of the two defenders, and kept up a steady fusillade with its assortment of weapons. There were roars from old muskets which had to be reloaded with the aid of a ramrod, and here and there a Sharpe's repeating rifle barked like a terrier, with short intervals between the barks.

The shots and savage cries drowned every other sound and, without warning, a troop of twenty horsemen galloped over the knoll and into the light of the burning haystack.

They were in civilian dress, but rode in good order—the well-mounted and carefully drilled emergency militia of the free-Staters' stronghold and each trooper carried a Sharpe's rifle.

The leader flung up his arm with a commanding gesture, as he rode courageously into the very midst of the battling ruffians, and the firing ceased abruptly.

The mob quieted down to sullen mutterings and threats, but eyed the grim troopers and their ready rifles with instinctive respect.

Braithwaite and Upham elbowed a way through the group and saluted the commander.

"I don't care to hear your story, gentlemen," said the commander brusquely, before they could open their defense. "I know all that I need to know of the affair. I'm sent here to disperse this mob and protect the family that lives here, and I'm fully prepared to do it.

"Get your men together and march! Return to your camp by the most direct route, and don't halt on the way. Sheriff Jones has disclaimed all responsibility for this outrageous proceeding, and he has assured General Robinson that there will be no recurrence of such tactics."

"Did Sheriff Jones send you here, captain?" Braithwaite demanded respectfully, but with indignation reserved for Sheriff Jones.

"He did not, but he agreed that General Robinson was justified in sending us," answered the leader. "That we got here in time—that we came at all, for that matter, is due to the heroism of that young girl that guided us here.

"She escaped from the house and ran cross-country to Lawrence, and she mounted a horse and led us here, in spite of her fright and exhaustion. That's heroism, Mr. Braithwaite, in contrast to the cowardly bushwhacking of your human bloodhounds!"

"I disclaim—"

"Not a word!" snapped the leader. "Assemble your mob and march!'

Reuel had dragged the noose from his neck, and was on his feet, leaning weakly against the bole of the tree which had come so near to figuring as his gibbet.

In a daze, utterly bewildered by the confusion of events, he saw Roberts and Dr. Vincent lift Hubert Dawson and bear him toward the house. He saw Hetty Leeds slide from a horse among the militia troopers, and go—all torn and bedraggled from her frantic race for help—staggering after Roberts and Vincent, to aid them in caring for the wounded man.

Eustace Leeds emerged from the cabin, as his daughter and the two men carried Hubert in, and came out to the commander of the rescuers.

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"I want to go on record, cap'n," he said thickly, "that I never did fire a shot nor lift my hand ag'in' a livin' soul this whole day. I always did aim to obey the laws an' pay my taxes."

The commander wheeled his horse to right about, and rode off to supervise the orderly retreat of the border ruffians.

CHAPTER IX.

ANDROMEDA.

TOWARD midnight Roberts and Vincent returned to Lawrence with the captain of the troop, leaving six men to guard the cabin against a possible return of the ruffians. Hubert Dawson rested easily on a pile of bedding by the fire in the cabin, after having bullets extracted from his thigh and his forearm.

Hetty, refusing to surrender to exhaustion, kept watch by her brother's cot, while the other women slept in the rear room, and Eustace snored steadily, slumped down in his favorite chair.

Reuel, his battered head swathed in bandages, insisted on sharing the young girl's vigil, and when she objected, he pleaded a special anxiety for his wounded friend.

"I wish I knew what to say, Hetty," he began awkwardly, after they had sat for a long time in silence. "It seems hard, somehow, to thank any one for saving your life. It—well, it's not that my life is of great value to anybody, but—you don't know what to say to any one that has done so much for you.

"The risk you took, you know—all that danger and hardship! You saved—oh, I hardly know how many lives! Those men were like lunatics; they'd have burned this house and killed every man and woman here. Your reënforcements came just in time to stop a massacre."

To his further embarrassment and confusion, Hetty stared into the crackling fire and looked positively bored.

"Why must you say anything about it?" she demanded rather coldly, after a painful pause. "I suppose you *are* grateful; that's natural enough; but I didn't do so very much.

"We're a mean-spirited, low-down family," she went on truculently. "If I do anything decent, I guess it's because I'm trying to show that not every one of the Leedses is altogether ungrateful and contemptible.

"Hector's fine—he'd be a gentleman if he had a chance, but, of course, they had to go an' shoot 'im! Why couldn't they have shot—er—my Lord! You know what I mean! Why shouldn't they shoot that man that's my father? And why should Justus Godfrey live another day—when there's no law against poisoning rats?"

"You'd better not talk, Hetty," said Reuel, vastly uncomfortable. "No one could blame you, I'm sure—but you're in a terrible state of mind. When a—a young girl turns against her family—I mean when she has just cause to do so, on the finer principles of ethics and behavior, why then, her bitterness must be something almost too hard to bear.

"Even persons of position in the world are inclined to shield and defend members of their families who are objects of contempt. But I'd better say no more. I understand, Hetty, and I—I'm sorry for you."

"I don't want you to be!" she replied sharply. "I don't want anybody to be sorry for me. I'm not a pleasant person naturally; I've always been sour and hard, they say; I never had any friends. And I don't want any friends—even if I could have 'em!

"If you want to," she went on in a strangely whimsical way, after another pause, "you can write to your girl in Washington and tell her about it. You might even tell her that I—that I did what I did, for her. I like to think sometimes of happy, well-bred girls in the world, having a good time, and being ladies.

"You might tell her that I'm glad

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you're going to live to marry her, and that she hasn't got anything to break her heart about. Tell her I'm just the daughter of one of the squatters out here, and a pretty rough specimen—that I was born to fight, and love a fight better than anything else. That 'll give her something to talk about, at least, and—well, I hope she'll never be unhappy."

"Hetty, this is horrible!" he exclaimed, feeling something almost like revulsion as he stared at her lowering, savage little face. "Why don't you get away from all this?

"You were to be a school teacher. Why don't you go back East and work out your own life? You have unusual spirit and intelligence, and you owe your family nothing; I believe there's no injustice in saying that."

"You can't break away from—fate!" she muttered. "I'm tied here, bound to a rock, like—who was it, *Andromeda?* If I left, they'd kill Hector, working him to death. He'd never leave.

"Then I'm somehow fond of my mother," she added sadly; "that is, when she's not too foolish. You've got to think that she's had to live with that man! If Hector and I went away, they'd all starve to death; there wouldn't be a sane human being in the house."

"Nevertheless, every mortal ought to have a chance at life and happiness," he said. "Perhaps your *Perseus* will come, one of these days, and free you. I wish I could help, but it's too much for me; I'm not wise enough to offer advice; we all make pretty sorry messes of things, trying to manage our own little worlds."

They thought that the wounded Hubert was asleep, but he stirred suddenly on his bed.

"Trouble with most folks that suffer is, they don't know how to be mean enough," he muttered harshly. "Meanness don't ever understand anything but meanness! Give these cantankerous folks some of their own medicine, and they'll have some respect for you.

"You quit cooking and baking and scrubbing all the time, Hetty," he suggested practically, "and cut the old man's rations down to hardscrabble. Get fifty pounds o' fat off his carcass, and he'll begin to think about things. You'd have 'im eating out o' your hand in a little while."

"I guess you're a little delirious with fever, Mr. Dawson," Hetty replied with a little gleam of humor. "Anyhow, you don't know my father. If anybody was to cut off his food, he'd just sit in his chair and starve to death."

Hubert turned slightly, away from the light, groaned as his wounds hurt him, and composed himself for sleep.

"About *Perseus,*" said Hetty in a low voice, "I was just going to tell you that I don't want any Perseus to come into the life of this Andromeda. That's the last thing I'd want! Mother got married, didn't she? Rosa got married. Two husbands are—just two too many in this family."

There was a gentle tap on the door, and the corporal of the militia guard asked if he might come in.

"There's trouble brewing at Lawrence," he said to Reuel, as soon as Hetty admitted him. "An orderly just came out here to get four of us fellers back to town.

"Said the cap'n wanted me and one other to stay here, because there are two sick men and the women, but General Robinson has sent out all around for all the able-bodied men to come in quick. A lot more men from over the line landed at the Wakarusa camp tonight, and they say Sheriff Jones is getting ready to march on the town before daylight."

"I thought," said Hetty, "that Sheriff Jones sent word to Braithwaite that he didn't approve of violence."

"So he did, miss," the corporal chuckled; "but you see he'd heard about Mr. Tristram being related to

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the Senator. Jones, he don't want to be bad friends with no Senator."

"Have the men started back with the orderly?" asked Reuel.

"Not yet. They're having some hot coffee; then they're going."

"I'll go with them," said Reuel gravely. "I don't know how able-bodied they'd call me, but a headache ought not to keep a man out of battle."

"I'll tell 'em to wait," said the corporal. "Do you think that Mr. Leeds would go along? There's a Mr. Godfrey that lives here, too, ain't there?"

"They're not able-bodied men, either of them," said Hetty quickly.

"That so? Mr. Leeds always looks right hearty and chipper. What's wrong with 'im?"

"Consumption," said Hetty; "consumption of food and drink. It's incurable."

The corporal looked puzzled, then grinned understandingly.

"Don't let those men get away," cautioned Reuel. "I'll be with them as soon as I get an overcoat and a gun."

"I don't mean to be inquisitive, Mr. Tristram," said Hetty, as the corporal went out, "but—why do you go? We don't need you here; I'm not afraid; but you don't have to go. You're not a settler, and you don't think of stopping long in Kansas, and you've got a sweetheart. Why should you go and fight for the free-Staters, any more than you'd fight for the pro-slavery men?"

Reuel flushed self-consciously.

"That's a hard question!" he exclaimed. "Perhaps I don't really know why I go. I wonder! I guess it's a sort of instinct, Hetty. Men have always taken sides, and fought for great religious or political principles.

"And you speak of my sweetheart! That's an even harder question. But men have always set aside love, home, comfort, and every personal interest, to fight under their chosen banners.

"I don't know these men in Lawrence very well," he went on reflectively, "but they're men of my color, my race, my way of thinking. Good men or bad, rich or poor, high or humble, they're willing to fight and die for their love of freedom, and some instinct sends me to fight beside them."

"I suppose that's the way it is—with most men," said Hetty. "I could never tell how it was, by the men of my own family."

Reuel borrowed Hubert's heavy reefer, for the November night was cold, and knowing that Hubert would approve, he took his seven-shooter and added it to his own equipment.

"If Jones's men are attacking Lawrence in force," he said to Hetty, "you're practically safe here to-night. Jones wouldn't spare a single man from such an attack."

"I told you I wasn't afraid," she answered pertly. "They needn't have left the two men here—except for Mr. Dawson's safety. I've got the rifle. Good night, Mr. Tristram."

"Good night, Hetty," he responded, a little irritated by her failure to wish him luck or a safe return and went out.

CHAPTER X.

THE MANTLE OF PEACE.

REUEL rode through the night with the troopers in a peculiarly somber mood. The sickening squalor, the sordidness of the Leeds household had got under his skin—a skin that he had previously flattered himself, in the exuberance of youth, was already hardened like bright armor by the rigors of official life in Washington.

No sympathetic, sensitive person could talk with Hetty Leeds for half an hour and go forth from the interview as ready as ever to look upon the world as the bright and beautiful realm of a godlike human race.

As he rode in heavy silence, almost rudely repelling the friendly overtures

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of his companions, he thought of the ugly contrast between the Eastern cities and the new towns of the frontier, and the disillusioning contrast between the veneered society of drawing-rooms and market places and the raw rabble of the new territories.

While staying at the Free State Hotel he had beguiled the tedium of the long days and cheered himself considerably by writing long letters to Miranda, and a good deal of quiet, restrained humor had gone into his descriptions of the wagon train and its passengers.

Always, however, he avoided the ugly, sordid aspects of the frontier scenes and episodes, for Miranda was a creature of light who would shrink from unlovely things and be sorely wounded even by vicarious harshness.

Another letter must be written, he reflected, if he lived through the coming day, for Miranda would grow anxious for his safety if the Western mail brought her nothing; but he scarcely knew what there was to write; the tragi-comedies of the Leeds family could not be put on paper by a critic who had looked into the hearts and minds of the actors.

A trail crossed the California Road less than a mile from Lawrence, and at the intersection the party nearly rode into a considerable body of horsemen moving north. The orderly cried out a warning as he, riding in advance, made out the shadowy outlines of the cavalcade, and the others reined back sharply and halted.

The larger body did not halt, and there were no challenges, though the unknown horsemen were talking and laughing among themselves, and some of them called out mockingly to the small party of riders and made ribald jests.

"Who were they?" inquired Reuel, sliding his revolver back into the holster when it had leaped at the first alarm.

"Kickapoo Rangers, most likely," said the orderly. "Different troops from the Wakarusa camp have been moving out ever since sundown."

"Kickapoo Rangers — Atchison's men!" Reuel exclaimed. "Come now! Why didn't they fire at us?"

"The shooting begins later on," said the soldier. "They're not so anxious to begin. Sam Jones was in town himself to-day, talking with Robinson and Lane, and some of the Missourians have been in to the stores and bought things.

"When Sam Jones gives the word they'll start fighting and plundering, and it may be to-night. They've got parties all around the town, on all the hills, and it looks like business."

Reuel said no more. It was all too strange and irregular for his orderly comprehension.

The first challenge was by their friends, the pickets at the town line, and there was some little ceremony of exchanging passwords and countersigns. That done, they entered the town, and Reuel found that it had grown amazingly more warlike in the hours of his absence.

In those small hours of the morning there seemed to be little rest or sleep. Sentries paced the streets and guarded public buildings and stores. Companies of men marched solemnly in processions, moving, evidently, to salient posts in the line of defense.

Reuel went to the hotel and reported his readiness for duty to Luther Roberts, who was sitting up in his apartments all through the hours of suspense, waiting for the expected alarm and orders from General Robinson.

"You should have had enough of fighting for awhile," Roberts remarked; "but I admire your spirit. With official Washington apparently against us—with Northern Congressmen and officials playing into the hands of slave holders and land pirates, we still hope for triumph and ultimate success, because ours is the indomitable spirit—we are the die-hards."

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Morning dawned, and not a shot had been fired. The sentries reported all quiet around the town. The object of the marching and countermarching, the "alarums and excursions" on the part of Sheriff Jones's ruffian army, was obscure, but if the sheriff of Douglas County conceived it all as an elaborate, if expensive, practical joke, he succeeded at least in giving General Robinson and his little army of defense an anxious and busy night.

The demonstrations had, too, another effect, unknown to the sheriff, and unlikely to be of more than doubtful interest to him personally: they developed the situation for Reuel Tristram to the point of a definite choice between the courses open to him, and he deliberately cast his lot with the defenders of Lawrence and the free-State, antislavery cause, thereby repudiating the conservative, noncommittal, and cautious political policy of his uncle, at the risk of incurring his serious displeasure with all the penalties that it involved.

The December of 1855 came in like the lamb of April. The nights were keenly cold, but the sunshine was uncommonly genial in the daylight hours, and furnished welcome encouragement to the new settlers who had pictured Kansas as a sort of semitropical land of plenty.

Old-timers predicted an open winter and an early spring, and, with the mendacity of local partisans the world over, assured the newcomers that no word pictures of the charms and advantages of the territory could be exaggerated by the most imaginative of men.

Dr. Vincent brought Hubert Dawson into town in his buggy and made him comfortable at the hotel. The wound in his thigh that crippled him was mending rapidly, and escape from the peculiar hospitality of the Leeds family sent his spirits up to normal.

"One more week there for me," he told Reuel, "and I swear I'd 'a' married Hetty, killed the old man, and shoved Rosa and Gran'ma out in the horse shed."

"You could do worse than marry Hetty," said Reuel gravely. "If courage and honesty and loyalty are anything at all, she should be a proper wife for any good man. And you, Hubert, are the kind of man that could give her a new faith in human nature and the world."

The big fellow suddenly turned red.

"Between you and me, Reuel," he said sheepishly, "I told that girl Hetty to come along into Lawrence with me and—and we'd get married."

The younger man looked surprised and interested.

"Well, what did Hetty say?"

"I think my wounds saved me, Reuel. My ears still ache from the tongue-lashing I got, but if I'd been all right, 'stead of lame and sick, I reckon she'd 'a' shot me dead."

"Most women would jump at the chance of getting you, Hubert," said Reuel seriously. "I'm sorry about Hetty. She might have better sense!"

"Too much sense, I guess," observed the other. "You see, I'm a *man,* and so is her father. If that ain't enough to get any critter hung, you tell me something worse I could be!"

There were fresh alarms that day, and Reuel was summoned to make the rounds of the log forts and the outposts with Luther Roberts. Scouts and spies reported great activity in the Wakarusa camp, and predicted an attack not later than the following morning.

The prevailing conditions and daily developments, however, were sorely confusing to Reuel, if not to men with longer local experience. Governor Shannon condescended at last to visit the territory of which he was the appointed ruler, and he was reported at the village of Franklin, near by, and was said to have visited the Wakarusa camp.

To the further mystification of the

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people of Lawrence, General Robinson and Colonel Lane, with a party of other local notables, ventured within the enemy's lines and met the Governor at Franklin for a council.

They demanded for Lawrence and all free-State sympathizers equal rights with the proslavery element, and official protection against raids and illegal incursions on their property, and found the Governor narrowly prejudiced, obdurate, and brutally rude.

At succeeding conferences, however, General Robinson's eloquence and obvious sincerity swayed the politician appreciably. He conceded the justice of some of the Northerners' claims, and finally admitted that he had been grossly misinformed regarding some of the conditions.

A Northerner himself, once Governor of Ohio, he could understand the Yankee attitude of mind, but his political fortunes had been cast with the proslavery partisans, and in his most reasonable and liberal moods he could offer nothing but compromise.

A compromise was at last accepted by the free-Staters, as better than nothing at all, and Governor Shannon blithely supervised the drawing of a treaty between the warring factions.

Sheriff Jones and his mercenaries were restrained from further depredations. The people of Lawrence were pledged to keep the peace and obey the laws established by a proslavery Legislature, but they were conceded the right to bear arms and maintain a militia force sufficient to guarantee the security of their homes and property.

With the treaty signed and sealed, the free-Staters squirmed under the conviction that they were duped, but, on the other side, Jones and his henchmen declared war to the knife and vengeance for all their blasted hopes.

The 8th of December, a warm and springlike day, saw—not the breaking up of the Wakarusa camp and the disbanding of the army, but strenuous preparations for an immediate attack on Lawrence, in open defiance of the Governor's mandate.

Warnings were rushed to the threatened town, and there the guards were doubled, the troops were hurried to their stations, and every preparation was made for the resistance of the attack that had been so long awaited.

Hubert Dawson took back his beloved seven-shooter from Reuel, and hobbled from the hotel on crutches, ready and eager to take his part in the defense.

Reuel was equipped with sword and revolver, like the other commissioned officers of the local militia, and directed to attend General Robinson as one of his aids. At noon the rumors of an advance of the border ruffians came thick and fast, but still the defenders watched and waited.

The sun disappeared in a cloud bank, and a chill fell upon the earth. Men who had complained of the unseasonable heat in the morning began to shiver and rub their hands.

Soon it began to snow lightly, and the wind rose. Snow squalls were followed by dashes of sleet and hail, and soldiers were permitted to send to their homes for overcoats and mittens.

From the Wakarusa camp came a report that Jones's mercenaries, recruited from the Carolinas and other Southern States, were shriveled in the blast. They were huddled, said the informant, close about the roaring camp fires, and, even so, were further fortifying themselves with whisky, the supply of which was running out at a rapid rate.

In the afternoon the sleet and hail gave way to heavy snow, and New Englanders recognized the signs and portents of a veritable blizzard, with all the terrors that it might bring.

By night the Wakarusa camp was broken. The bloodthirsty invaders were tamed and cowed by the merciless elements, and they began a retreat southward, like the migrating birds, observing no order in their going.

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At the end of a bewildering day, peace fell upon the beleaguered town with the immaculate mantle of winter.

CHAPTER XI.

WINTER.

DR. VINCENT came to Reuel's room in the hotel on the following day with disquieting reports of the effects of the blizzard on the outskirts of the town. He had come in from an heroic tour of professional visits, and was muffled in furs, but shivering and half exhausted.

"I'm about done, you see," he groaned, sinking into a chair, "but I wish somebody else would go out and try it. If you're feeling fit for it, Tristram, I wish you'd try to get to the Leeds place with some food."

"Food!" cried Reuel, startled. "Have they no food?"

"They're hit hard," Vincent explained gravely. "I've been there. The boy is—not so well. It may mean pneumonia for him. You know how their cabin was built. There are snowdrifts inside the house. The fire in the fireplace melts the snow around it, and the water runs over the floors and freezes again.

"It's as windy in the house as it is outside," he reflected, "and the snow blows in at a hundred crevices in the walls. Eustace was going a marketing to-day—you know how it would be. They have nothing; they're starving right now! I left them a flask of brandy—put it in Hetty's charge on her father's account; it was all I had to offer them.

"Somebody's got to get out there with bread and meat and anything else that can be carried."

"Of course I'll go," said Reuel. "I'm not a stranger to storms; I wallowed through a score of New England winters."

"You'll need all your experience! Don't try a sleigh. There are sleighs upset and swamped in the drifts all along the road. Blanket your horse well, for his sake, and take just as much food with you as you can stuff into the saddle bags."

Reuel claimed no supremacy for New England winters when he rode his shuddering, snorting steed out of the town and breasted the blast on the California road.

To remain in the saddle he was forced to hold to the pommel with his numbed hands. A borrowed fur cap was drawn well down over ears and face, and a woolen muffler was wrapped thrice about his neck, but his eyes seemed frost bitten, and his heavy overcoat was penetrated by every gust of cutting, blithing wind.

There were three miles to cover, and he did them, but it took two hours of painful maneuvering. Such travel required the skill of a navigator, and the struggling horse kept doggedly on with dumb obedience and fidelity.

The cabin was a dark blotch upon a white sea. It stood alone. The shed had gone with the gales, and the horses and cows were nowhere to be seen.

Reuel tumbled from the saddle, pulled off the saddle bags, rearranged the horse's blanket, and tethered the animal in the lee of the house.

He pounded on the door, and in a moment it was opened by Hetty. She was white and wide-eyed with fear, and her welcome, as she recognized him, had no warmth in it.

Hector's cot, drawn close to the fire, was piled with blankets, and the boy moaned feebly and seemed to struggle for breath.

Mrs. Leeds, the grandmother, and Rosa were huddled together, almost among the embers, and Eustace sat crouched near them, shaken by chills and complaining bitterly of his hardships.

Reuel threw off his heavier burden of wraps and made haste to stir the fire. From the bags he took bread and flour, tea, coffee, and bacon. There

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was a marrow bone for broth, and a packet of dried beans for rich porridge.

"Any liquor?" muttered Eustace. "I couldn't eat. I've got chills."

Reuel produced a bottle and handed it to Hetty.

"Give him a little in a cup," he directed bluntly. "The rest is for emergencies. Hide it."

Gradually Hetty came to life and helped to prepare some hot food. The bread was devoured with wolfish greed by the three women, while the tea was being brewed, and the perishing Eustace deigned to sniff expectantly at the sizzling bacon.

Hetty staggered once, as she worked, and Reuel forced her to take some of the brandy.

"You haven't eaten or slept," he said. "I knew how it would be!"

"I'm not hungry," she declared. "It's worry—mostly. Hector's worse. He can't eat anything. I don't know—"

"We'll have him better soon," said Reuel, with vain optimism. "I've seen Dr. Vincent, and he's not alarmed. He'll be here again early to-morrow, and—well, we'll see to it that he finds things a little more comfortable, eh? I'm going to shovel some of this snow out where it belongs, and there's plenty of wood under the drifts out there."

With the sufferers fed and warmed by hot drinks, it was possible for Reuel to turn his attention to the ordering of the house, and he kept the chill from his own bones by laboring strenuously.

His overcoat was added to the pile of blankets on the boy's cot, and presently he complained that the exercise was working him into a sweat, and he tricked Hetty into putting on his reefer. She was shaking with chills, and had little of her habitual obstinacy.

Much of the snow was cleared from the floor, but still it came in through the log walls, and Reuel continued his battle with it. By burrowing in the drifts outside he salvaged enough wood for the night and piled it by the chimney.

Night came on early, and the cold strengthened, though the blizzard promised to abate.

Reuel lighted a whale-oil lamp and helped Hetty to rouse the fire and make flapjacks on a skillet in the glowing embers. Strong coffee was served for its stimulating qualities, and there was another issue of broiled bacon.

After that, it was difficult to endure the dreariness of the evening. There was no conversation, and Reuel was thankful for its absence, but the women complained bitterly of their hard fate, Eustace dozed fitfully and snored, and the sick boy murmured deliriously and panted for breath.

Hetty sat apart, ignoring even the fire, and made no sound. Her eyes were riveted on the sharp profile of her brother, and at every sterterous breath that he drew she winced.

Reuel looked at his watch. It was after ten, and he began to plan the disposition of the family for the night.

Hector stirred slightly, and the vigilant Hetty leaped up and flew to him.

Reuel followed her, stepping softly.

"Don't worry," he advised her. "He's not bad off, and the doctor will be able to do more for him to-morrow."

She took up one of the bottles from the table by the cot, and whispered to the boy that he must wake up and take the medicine.

He raised his long, powerful young arms suddenly and thrust the heavy covers away from him, freeing himself from the burden.

"He mustn't do that!" whispered Hetty anxiously. "Dr. Vincent said he mustn't—said he mustn't exert himself any."

She caught the groping hands and held them between her small, thin ones.

"Hetty!" called the lad in a hoarse, rasping voice.

"I'm here, little boy," she said quickly, tenderly, to the young six-foot giant. "Mustn't try to talk. I won't leave you."

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He tried to call out again, but his breath seemed to fail, and there was a horrible rhythmic roaring in his throat; his broad, full chest heaved up and down like a great bellows, and he struggled to free his hands from the passionate grasp of the terrified girl.

Reuel looked on in an agony of suspense, yet with the speculative detachment of the outsider. The young man, he feared, was very ill, yet his stalwart frame and abundant vitality must surely pull him through. The roaring in the throat grew quieter and the violent struggling almost ceased. That was encouraging, but there was a look about the very wide open eyes that struck a sudden dread on the observer.

"Some brandy!" whispered Reuel tensely. "It can't hurt him, and he seems—seems faint."

Hetty, her face matching the drifting snow, leaped past Reuel and snatched the bottle from the shelf.

"Here!" she gasped, holding it out, and he caught it as she let it fall.

Trying to be calm, he poured a spoonful into a cup and held it to Hector's lips, raising his head slightly. He let the liquid trickle between the lips slowly, to avoid possible strangling.

The patient's eyelids seemed to relax a little, relieving the painful stare, and the respiration appeared to grow more natural and easy.

"That helped," said Reuel.

"Is he all right?" breathed Hetty in the voice of a mouse.

She swayed weakly against Reuel's shoulder, and she was shaking from head to foot in a terrible reaction from the tension of a moment before.

A shrill, nerve-rasping old voice sounded close behind them. The grandmother had crept forward and was peering over Hetty's shoulder.

"Ain't dead, is 'e?" she wheezed. "Hold a lookin'-glass to his mouth, an' you c'n tell."

"Be still!" cried Reuel in a voice so awful that the old crone retreated.

"Folks generally try to be patient with real old people," spoke up Mrs. Leeds, her voice almost as sharp and cheerful as usual. "Hector ain't in danger, you don't think, do you? You an' Hetty ought to give us all warnin' if there's any change for the worse."

Reuel ignored her, his gaze being fixed on the sick man's ivory face.

"Hetty!" called the youth again, and his voice seemed stronger, but the eyelids were stretched wide once more and the eyes appeared too bright.

The girl fell on her knees beside the cot and slipped an arm under the pillow and around his shoulders.

"I'm here," she breathed. "I'm always with you, Hector."

"Keep hold o' me," he whispered. "What's this place? I want to go home. You come, Hetty—home. We oughtn't to left it."

There was a sudden strong muscular effort. He seemed to try to raise himself, but gave up.

Reuel, watching, saw the facial muscles contract till there was a wide-stretched, hideous grin transforming the handsome young face. Then, as though something snapped under strain, the features relaxed and composed themselves into a peaceful beauty.

Hetty stirred. She turned her head and looked at Reuel. Her eyes burned into his until she read in them what he knew.

Then he heard a shriek that was to linger in his memory all the days of his life.

It was a spontaneous explosion of long-repressed grief, dull agony, and perpetual woe. It seemed to have come from the heart rather than the vocal organs, the latter only serving to expand it to diapason volume.

The girl might have broken out in the thrilling rhetoric that comes mysteriously to the humble and inarticulate in moments of supreme passion or spiritual exaltation; she might have arraigned God, the universe, all human kind, for the injustices that crushed

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her; no formal utterance, however, could have epitomized the eternal human tragedy as did her shriek.

Reuel caught her in his arms and held her firmly, with some vague idea of supporting her mind as well as her body. She clung to him, gripping his arms with convulsive force that left a bruise for every finger tip. Strangely enough, her face was averted from the figure on the cot, and after the shriek, not a sound passed her lips, neither sigh nor moan.

The three other women gathered quickly about the cot, noisy in their lamentations. The mother's grief was piteous, yet it seemed to Reuel something conventional, after the one cry of the sister.

"I've buried three grandchildren," sniveled the old woman, "an' Hector, he'll be the fourth. Seems like God in His mercy has had some strange reason to preserve my life so long."

"In His name, will you be still!" cried Reuel fiercely, holding Hetty's head against his breast in a further effort to shield her.

Eustace Leeds placed himself in the center of the room. He was a large man, well-fashioned, with a face that, in repose, seemed not ill-favored.

Lifting up his eyes to the crudely wrought rafters and inadequate roof, he apostrophized his Maker.

"What have I done, oh Lord?" he boomed in a resonant barytone. "How have I deserved such punishment at Thy hands? My little one!

"Human flesh is weak, oh Father! I'm a sinner—a miserable sinner in Thy sight, yet have I not listened to Thy word and tried to read Thy laws aright? I've been a loving father, I've tried to be kind, yet this has come upon me—and it's more than I can bear!"

He paused, and lowered his eyes till they met those of Tristram.

"The ways of Almighty God are inscrutable," he informed Reuel. "Blessed be the Name of the Lord!"

Reuel gazed at him with a poignant loathing.

"They are inscrutable to me," he replied, "when I look at this poor child. If you must blaspheme at such a time, ask God what this girl has done to deserve such punishment. Ask God if He was not satisfied with the trial of Job, that he must break this frail child on the wheel to see how much living hell the soul can stand!"

"Young man, you are profane!" declared Eustace in righteous horror.

"And you're insane!" retorted Reuel. "Or else the filthiest worm that crawls on the earth."

There was a moment of tense silence; then the irrepressible old woman spoke again:

"Who's goin' to lay 'im out? No undertaker will come out here in this storm."

"Who cares about that?" demanded Reuel harshly. "Poor Hector doesn't; he's beyond such ugly things. It's a job for ancient ghouls."

His nerves were going, he realized, as Hetty's had gone; the horror of the scene was entering his soul.

A little wildly, wholly on the moment's impulse, he lifted Hetty in his arms and crossed the room. She was half conscious, and he hastily wrapped her in his overcoat.

"What," cried Eustace, "are you going to do?"

"Take her to Lawrence," answered the young man. "This place would kill her in another day, and she must have a chance to live."

"It's abduction!" stormed the father. "I forbid it—I, her father! Do you hear me?"

Reuel brushed him aside with a furious sweep of his arm, and he toppled backward and fell, howling with rage and fright, close to the smoking embers.

A puff of wind swept through the room, the door slammed sharply, and Reuel and Hetty were gone.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

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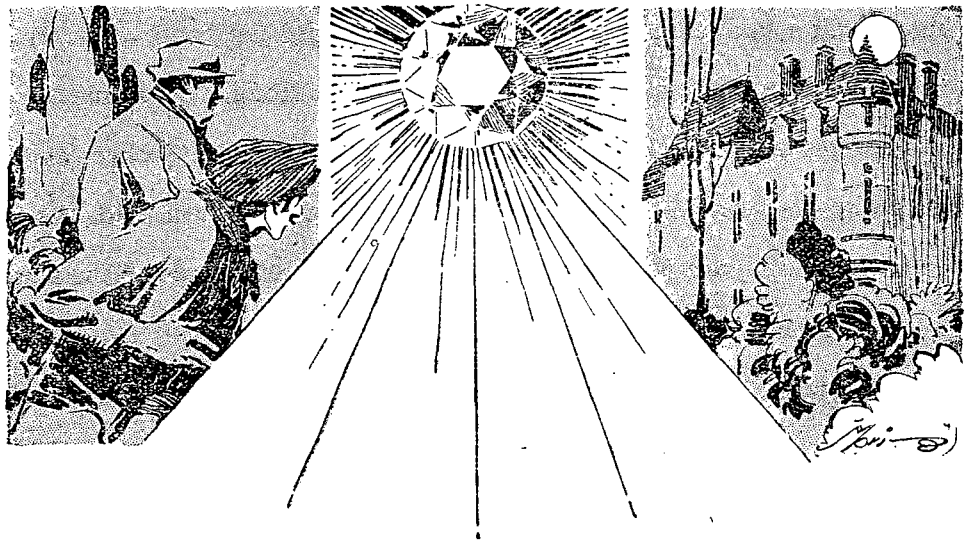

The Karma Diamond

Two men who live by their wits stage a guessing contest as to the other's intentions, and thus start a race which spans a continent and an ocean

By BEN CONLON

CLEMENT RAYNOR dismissed his taxi on Wilshire Boulevard, and walked briskly up the driveway flanked by the velvety lawn of the Hotel Ambassador.

Was Perry Emlin still in Los Angeles, and, if so, would Emlin think it strange that Raynor was spying on his movements? Or was Perry Emlin already on the wing?

He sauntered into the palm-lined lobby, and his keen black eyes swept over the hotel lounge without appearing to do so. Emlin was not there.

Clement Raynor sat down on a circular sofa where he could command a view of the lobby, and thought matters over very carefully. Of course he could inquire at the desk as to whether or not Mr. Emlin had checked out. That would be quite all right if Emlin had really gone, but it would be quite all wrong if Emlin had not gone, for it would be a clear tip-off to Emlin that Raynor was interested in his movements.

As he sat there and thought, the elevator door clicked, and Raynor felt an inward exultation as he saw a sleek, slender man slip from the lift into the crowded lobby, and, followed by a bellhop carrying a strapped suitcase, cross to the cashier's desk.

Raynor pulled an *Evening Herald* from his pocket and proceeded to read it; at least, he seemed to be reading it. What he was really doing was watching Perry Emlin as the latter paid his bill, received his change and passed a smiling remark with the clerk.

Things looked easy to Raynor now. Emlin would undoubtedly take a taxi, and Raynor, since he had not been seen, could easily trail him.

The location of the telephone booths, however, decreed that Raynor's move-

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ments were not to be so simple. Emlin handed a coin to the bellboy, motioned to him to call a taxi, and then turned and walked in the direction of the row of cubicles at the rear of the lounge. And the circular sofa, the *Evening Herald* and the man behind it lay right in his path.

Since discovery was absolutely unavoidable, self-disclosure seemed the better way, and Raynor put down his paper to consult his watch. The movement brought the two men into mutual recognition.

"Hello, Emlin!" Raynor greeted, in a tone of hearty astonishment.

Emlin's gray eyes lighted up.

"Hello, Raynor!" he returned. "You putting up here now?"

"No," replied Raynor, pulling out his watch again. "Just waiting for a friend. Confound these people that say seven o'clock and mean eight! How are tricks with you, old man?"

"Oh, same old routine. Have a little party on to-night. Just checked out. I'm running over to Beverly Hills for the week-end, may stay two or three days—if the gin holds out."

Emlin laughed at his own humor, and Raynor also laughed. And yet an analytical observer looking at these two men who made their living by their wits would have decided that they were far from close friends.

They were hearty enough in exteriors. It was some inward thing about each of them that would tell the analyst that each was watching the other as a cat might watch a mouse.

"Don't lick up too many orange-blossoms," warned Raynor. "That's why I'm feeling a little stale right now—failing to follow the advice which I hand out freely to others. But I'm reforming—sailing for Honolulu on the Maui to-night. Couple of weeks on Waikiki Beach ought to fix me up, I guess."

"Lucky dog! Well, look out for the hula girls. Say, I must telephone to my hostess out at Beverly Hills. Hope you have a good time—and I'm sure that you will. So long, Raynor."

He extended his hand. The other grasped it.

"So long, Emlin. Remember! Be temperate!"

Raynor once more looked at his watch as the other hurried on to the telephone booths. Then, with the air of a man impatient of waiting for a tardy friend, he threw down the newspaper, got up and walked out of the hotel.

He did not take a taxi from the stand there, but picked up one cruising along a couple of blocks above the Ambassador.

"Santa Fe Station," he told the driver. "Step on it! I want to make the seven forty-five train."

Arriving at the railroad terminal, he paid and tipped his driver, circled the station, and, standing in the shadows, waited. His position gave him a good view into the lighted waiting-room, and a grim smile crossed his countenance when, a few moments later, he saw Emlin enter the station from the street side and check his hand-luggage at the parcel-stand.

Waiting in the shadows for the next ten minutes, Raynor saw the Chicago Limited pull out promptly at seven forty-five—without Emlin.

Raynor circled the station again, keeping beyond the radius of the lights, and crossed the street. Half a block north he dodged into a drug store and entered a telephone booth.

"Spring 2390," he told the operator. And then: "Hello, Dan! Clem talking. Got to have a reservation on the Maui, Honolulu Line, to-night. I know, but I just got to have it, Dan. Listen! Have Alex get the matter fixed up at San Pedro, and have the necessary records handed to the purser. I'll be at his office on board half an hour before the ship sails. Explanations later. So long."

Then this keen-faced man who talked of going to Honolulu and made

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his reservations at the last moment, proceeded to the Electric Railway station and bought a ticket for San Pedro, the harbor of Los Angeles. An hour later he was sitting in the gloom of his stateroom, peering out between the half closed shutters.

His gray eyes gleamed in the half light as he saw a sleek, slender man come up the gangplank and turn toward the purser's office. As the sleek, slender man, who seemed to have forgotten all about his Beverly Hills party, walked swiftly along B-deck, Raynor took occasion to come out of his cabin and speak to the bath-steward in the passageway.

"I might as well fix up with you now, steward," he said. "I want to get an early bath appointment every morning.

The bath-steward drew his appointment-book from the pocket of his coat.

"Yes, sir," he said cheerily. "I can give you between six and six fifteen, or between seven thirty and seven forty-five."

"Between six and six fifteen," said Raynor. "That will do very well. I make a practice of rising early on shipboard. Salt-water bath, and not too hot."

He passed the steward a bill. "I'll fix you up again just before we make port," he said.

From the corner of his eye he noted that the sleek, slender man had paused, and was intently taking in the conversation.

Raynor stepped back into his stateroom, once more peered through the half closed shutters, and saw Emlin turn and walk to the gangplank.

A half hour later, just as the "All ashore that's going ashore" gong was being sounded, Clement Raynor slipped down the gloomier gangplank forward, and disappeared quickly into the darkness at the rear of the wharf.

He smiled a little to himself as he caught a taxi. "Santa Fe Station, Los Angeles," he told the driver.

Again the mouse had turned into the cat.

Once more in the gloom beyond the lights of the Santa Fe Station, Clement Raynor watched. He could hear the panting and steaming of the huge locomotive attached to the midnight train as he remained there almost motionless. His keen gray eyes were leveled at the parcel-stand.

The first section of the midnight train pulled out, and a frown of disappointment flitted over Raynor's features. Then, as the "All Aboard" call for the second section was being bawled out, a man rushed through from the street to the parcel-stand, handed in a check and received a light strapped suitcase. He ran to the train which had already started to move, and swung himself aboard.

The man was Perry Emlin who, right now, if his story had been true, should have been sampling an orange-blossom cocktail at Beverly Hills.

Raynor remained in the shadows until the red tail-light of the midnight train disappeared around a slight curve. He kindled a cigarette.

"Well, Mr. Perry Emlin," he said. "So you take a Chicago train to get to Beverly Hills, do you? And before you dare risk that, you make sure that Mr. Clement Raynor is aboard the Honolulu boat. Only one thing would warrant all that caution."

He looked at his watch. It showed seven minutes after midnight.

Then Mr. Clement Raynor walked through the lighted station and hailed another taxi, and his subsequent actions were very unusual for a man who believed he had gone stale and wanted a couple of weeks on the beach at Waikiki.

II.

THE taxi speeded toward Hollywood, and before a great sprawling building on Sunset Boulevard, Raynor alighted and ordered his driver to wait, while he bounded up the steps of an

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office and rang the bell of the Hazlitt Film Studio. A watchman answered the ring, and Raynor, after a few explanatory words, entered the office.

Ten minutes later he emerged with a slip of paper, read off a street address to the driver, and got into the cab again. He dismissed the chauffeur when the car drew up before a small bungalow almost in the Hollywood foothills.

The sleepy man who answered his bang on the door was far from genial.

"What's the idea of waking up a fellow at this time of night?" he demanded.

"I want you," said Raynor, calmly, "to fly me to Chicago."

"Chicago! *Chicago! Chicago!*" gasped the man in the bungalow doorway.

"That's right," Raynor agreed. "It's a city in Illinois," he added, with his whimsical smile.

"Say," challenged the other, "have you any idea that you are kidding me?"

"None. I was never more serious in my life. I understand that your stunt flying at the Hazlitt Studio is over for a few days. You must have a good ship, or it couldn't take those stunt strains of yours. A thousand dollars and all expenses."

The sleepy aviator showed signs of weakening.

"I'd have to refuel at Albuquerque," he said.

"I don't care where you refuel. What's the verdict? Yes or no."

The aviator was grinning now.

"Anybody that says a thousand dollars to me," he told his visitor, "can always get me to say 'yes.' I'd say 'Yes, *sir*' for that. Rather low financially. Just paid for a new engine. The old Jenny's in the hangar at De Mille Field. It looks like I'm willing, brother, but I want to see the thousand bucks before we start, and say, if we both get killed I won't charge you for the ship."

"That's satisfactory," said Raynor, smiling.

"Say," put in the aviator with another grin, "I'm not sure yet that all this isn't a practical joke."

Raynor took out a roll of bills, and passed over two of them. The numeral on each was 100.

"What's your opinion now?" he asked. "That's a retainer. The other eight hundred, in cash, when I meet you at De Mille Field at eight o'clock this morning."

"Come inside," was the invitation.

Raynor entered and sat down.

"I don't believe I can get the old wagon fixed up before noon," said the pilot, who announced his name to his friends as Jimmy and suggested that Raynor call him that. "You want everything safe, don't you?"

"The main thing, Jimmy," Raynor told him, "is to get to Chicago, whether the thing's safe or not. And don't talk about this. We can't have any publicity to speak of right now. We'll say nine o'clock at the field."

As a matter of fact, it was only a few minutes after eight when Clement Raynor walked across De Mille Field, attracted to the spot of his rendezvous by the roar of twelve motors being tuned up behind the sheds.

His pilot had been working on the ship since dawn, and had been idling his new engine in order to work in the bearings. A portable tank had been installed in addition to the regular fuselage one, and the fueling had been completed.

Raynor and his pilot hopped off shortly before ten.

III.

It was ideal flying weather, and it was still a couple of hours before dusk when Albuquerque was reached. The travelers had dinner, Jimmy, the pilot, checked up on his plane and refueled, and the pair hopped off for St. Louis in the darkness, arriving at Lambert

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Field shortly after dawn. Jimmy's hardy little monoplane touched wheels at Maywood Field, the airport of Chicago, between ten and eleven o'clock.

Quick good-bys were said, and within a few minutes Clement Raynor was speeding toward Chicago in a motor car, where he secured his reservation for the Twentieth Century, Limited. Leaving the Windy City at 12:40 P. M., he would arrive in New York at nine forty the following morning, probably a few minutes earlier.

As the wheels clicked monotonously over the rails, Raynor had time for some thoughts which could hardly take definite shape in an airplane. The entire object of his haste was to get in contact with the Marquis Henri de la Bonnière at the earliest possible moment. In order to do this, he would have to map out a swift program for execution in New York.

A battle of wits is not always as spontaneous as it may sound. Often a great deal of methodical labor is required in advance of any clash between the parties concerned, and Clement Raynor had lived too long by his wits to be unaware of the value of method.

In a notebook he jotted down the duties to be performed in New York, and wrote out a cablegram. The cablegram he dispatched next morning, when the train pulled to a stop at the Grand Central at nine twenty-five, a quarter of an hour early.

Checking his light baggage, he made a hurried trip to lower Broadway, dropping in at the United States Line offices and then the French Line. At the latter he got his desired information, departed with a smile of satisfaction, and made a few purchases for the voyage he intended to take.

A few hours later he boarded the Berengaria. In his pocket was a properly visaéd passport, still good for another year, as it had been issued only a year earlier.

There was nothing to do now but wait, which was a difficult thing to do. But resigning himself to nearly five days of ocean travel, Raynor succeeded in devious ways to while away the many wakeful hours.

Landing at Southampton, he lost no time in transferring his few belongings and taking the first flight he could get across the channel to Bourget Field, Paris.

"Now," thought Clement Raynor to himself, "for the dirty work!"

The adjective in his thoughts was colloquial rather than descriptive, for Mr. Clement Raynor, whose home was where he hung his hat, was a gentleman who sometimes lived by his wits, and sometimes continued to live, simply because he outwitted others.

His first act was to ascertain the whereabouts of Marquis Henri de la Bonnière.

IV.

LE MARQUIS HENRI DE LA BONNIÈRE was a very interesting man. But it was not as a man that he interested Clement Raynor. The marquis was interesting to Raynor at present only as sole owner of the famous Karma diamond, and for no other reason.

Whoever the owner of this gem might be, that individual would be of much consequence to Raynor, and circumstances had made Bonnière the present owner of the historic gem.

Raynor was not aware of the exact nature of the circumstances which had brought the great Karma into the possession of Bonnière, but he could guess. At any rate, the possession was apparently actual and legal, and that was all that was necessary to Raynor—with the exception of one other matter. This other matter was how to go about separating the Marquis Henri de la Bonnière from the Karma diamond.

Securing the Karma would be a titanic task. Raynor wondered just what charm the debonair marquis had exerted over the Emir of Bokhara, in whose possession the gem had been till Bonnière came along.

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The genealogy of the historic Karma was somewhat muddled. Several conflicting stories were current, but the pedigree that Raynor liked best was a pruning and joining of parts of the various traditions.

This was that nothing definite could be said about the stone prior to the fourteenth century, except that it had been successively owned by a Khedive, then a wealthy Calcutta merchant, and then a Khan. From the year 1386, the great Karma had been in India.

For two centuries it remained in the family of the Rajah of Pudukota. From there it passed in 1803 to the remnant of the Cafavi, in Persia, but soon returned to India, to the possession of the Rajah of Sailana.

Here entered some more doubt, as one story had it that Runjit Singh of the Punjab, who was already owner of the famous Kohinoor diamond, acquired the Karma as well. At the death of Singh, after a period as the eye of a peacock in the storied peacock throne at Delhi, the Karma disappeared.

Perhaps the disappearance was not entirely without design, for already it was known that Queen Victoria of England coveted the Kohinoor, now in the custody of the treasury of Lahore. In 1849, by treaty, the latter gem passed into the collection of the British crown jewels; but the Karma was lost to knowledge.

Many years later it came to light in the ownership of the Emir of Bokhara, who was able to produce papers showing that his predecessors had legitimately acquired it.

The Emir had rejected all offers for the stone for many years. Wealthy Americans, royalties of many courts, and numerous collectors from various parts of the globe had found it impossible to part the emir from his historic possession.

Then, as a shock to the world, came the announcement that the Marquis de la Bonnière had traded in the greater part of the Bonnière fortune for the great stone.

Now that the Karma seemed once more to be in circulation, there would be a general rush in the direction of the marquis, who was the first non-Asiatic to own Karma. Bonnière, with the beautiful gem in his possession, was on his way from the Orient to Paris.

The newspapers had printed the legend surrounding the stone, that to Europeans it could bring nothing but disaster. How the stone first got its name is not clear, but in Sanskrit "Karma" means action, or fate.

Theosophy intreprets it as meaning more—a chain of cause and effect linked up unendingly. The upshot of the whole implied that the Karma diamond would set in motion a series of dire causes and dire effects during its European tenure.

The Marquis de la Bonnière became a topic of discussion for the effete, the idle, and in fact everybody who read the daily journals.

If reports had proved accurate, Bonnière was leaving Nice, bound for Paris with his prize, at just about the time Clement Raynor was checking into his quiet hotel in the Rue Daunou. The marquis should arrive the next day, which was Thursday, and find a cablegram waiting for him.

Thursday evening, in keeping with his cablegram, Bonnière would expect a visit from Clement Raynor.

The latter, however, did not trust to reports on the activities of the interesting marquis. No matter how wide-awake the bodyguard might be, there was still considerable danger attaching to travel with so precious a cargo.

It was quite probable that the marquis would arrive later than the public reports indicated—or earlier. Accordingly, Clement Raynor went out for a stroll on Wednesday night, the very night following his arrival in Paris, and the night before the expected return of Bonnière.

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He did not return to his hotel until after midnight. Going up to his room, he turned the key in the lock, opened the door, switched on the lights, and stood face to face with four gendarmes who stood with automatics pointed at his head.

"What does this mean, gentlemen?" asked Raynor.

"We regret infinitely to disturb you, monsieur," replied the leader, a lithe man with piercing eyes. "It is necessary that you be searched. You are M. Clement Raynor?"

"I am he," replied Raynor, graciously submitting to the search, which was completed to the dissatisfaction of the officers.

"Le Marquis Henri de la Bonnière has been murdered," said the gendarme leader, "and the Karma diamond has been stolen. It will be necessary to take you into custody."

V.

At the office of the Paris prefect of police, Clement Raynor exhibited that skill which makes living possible to those whose preservation depends primarily on the exercise of wits. To some extent he answered questions, but the adroitness of his tongue and the confidence of his manner soon reversed the tables.

It was not long before Raynor was the questioner, and one of the most subtle police tribunals in the world was rapidly discovering that this keen-eyed American was no ordinary person.

Raynor sat sprawled in a chair.

"This interview," he said languidly, "is quite interesting. But the reason for it, monsieur?"

"On Bonnière's desk," returned the prefect, "lay your cablegram, still unopened. We opened it, noted your name, and, naturally, it was an easy matter to trace you through the card which strangers are required to make out when registering at Paris hotels. This happened to be at eleven o'clock. Bonnière had been dead not over one half hour.

"From the clerk at your hotel we received a description of M. Clement Raynor, which tallied with the description of a strange American seen in the Faubourg St. Germain in front of the Bonnière residence by two of our gendarmes at about ten fifteen. We know that about fifteen minutes after that time the marquis was found by a servant, and the throat of the marquis had been slashed.

"The servant who found the body reported that no one had been seen to enter or leave the establishment since Bonnière's unexpectedly early arrival. But *voilà*, monsieur! Already, perhaps, you must realize that this is sufficient reason for your presence here?"

"I think so," replied Raynor coolly. "But why should I be under suspicion if this evidence shows plainly that I had expected to see Bonnière tomorrow evening, and he is murdered this evening? My cablegram from New York stipulates Thursday evening at eight for my visit. Does it not seem that if I had entertained any idea of murdering the marquis, I would have kept my name—which you found on the cablegram—quite secret? Murderers do not cable their victims in advance, and thus foolishly place their names in documents available to the police."

The prefect shrugged his shoulders and smiled faintly.

"Ah, but we should be stupid indeed, monsieur," he said, "if we were unable to penetrate such a subterfuge. The cablegram appears to us as an attempt to divert suspicion rather than anything else. There is the crude murderer and the subtle murderer. We should of a certainty do you the honor, monsieur, of believing that you could never be coarse or obvious in your methods. One would know that from passing a word with you."

"Thank you," Raynor acknowl-

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edged smilingly. "May I trouble you for a cigarette, monsieur?"

"But certainly." The prefect extended his case. Raynor lit the tightly rolled cylinder and leaned back restfully again.

"But if I know anything about murders or the arts of murderers," he said to the prefect, "I believe I may say that no man guilty of this would register under his own name, nor would he give his real name to be placed on a hotel card. Would it not be rather challenging, monsieur, to do that after having sent a cablegram bearing that same name to a man who would be found murdered?

"Why should a murderer thus court the attention of the Paris police, when one could register under an assumed name, slip out of Paris, and in fact out of the country before his real identity was known, and thus furnish no clews at all? A clever criminal, monsieur, would not so blatantly bait the police—the police of Paris—I assure you."

The prefect looked at his lieutenant, the lieutenant looked at the gendarmes, and the gendarmes looked at the floor. The prefect pulled his mustache at both ends.

"You say that if you know anything of the arts of murderers," he said. "Might one ask if monsieur has a knowledge, then, of those arts?"

"Much of my life has been devoted to a study of those arts, monsieur," replied Raynor, "and to contact with persons practicing those arts. My knowledge is limited only by virtue of the fact that my experience has been theoretical rather than practical, for I have never practiced those arts myself."

"Monsieur means to imply that he is engaged in the work of uncovering criminals and bringing them to justice?"

"That's it!" Clement Raynor sat bolt upright suddenly and assumed a new manner. "Have you ever heard of Van Saale, Limited?" he asked.

The prefect smiled.

"Monsieur chooses to speak in the American manner," he said, inferring badinage. "One might as well ask if one had heard of Lloyd's, let us say."

"Quite true. Lloyd's is a larger firm, but it is no more prominent in the maritime world than Van Saale, Limited, is in the diamond world. Just as Lloyd's stands to lose many thousands of pounds when a ship is lost, so does my firm stand to lose thousands when a famous diamond is stolen. It is the owner who is protected, and the insurance company which stands to lose."

The prefect arched his bushy eyebrows.

"Is monsieur implying that he represents Van Saale?"

"He is," Raynor informed him. "Exactly that. Van Saale, Limited, has its own department of secret service. I have the honor to be a member of that department, and it is in connection with my duties as a member of that department that I am here in Paris."

"But your credentials, monsieur?"

For answer, Raynor took his penknife and made a neat incision in the lapel of his coat. He pulled out a small canvas. On it was a careful print of his photograph, his signature, and various counter-signings of the heads of the Van Saale Bureau of Amsterdam, Holland.

"I take it, monsieur," said Raynor, "that one of your varied knowledge is aware that the Van Saale Company does not limit its credentials to perishable paper or documents readily discovered.

"That would indeed be a bad thing should one of its bloodhounds fall in with and be searched by desperate international diamond thieves. I know, also, that the authenticity of several of these signatures may be proved by reference to the prefecture records."

"Ah, but, yes!" was the ready reply. "One is satisfied. But may one ask

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why monsieur did not choose to communicate and coöperate with us?"

"Because," replied Raynor readily, "there are times when too many cooks spoil the broth. I trusted, and correctly, that your department was taking all necessary precautions in the Bonnière matter without word from me. I came to Paris not to prevent any crime of which I had definite knowledge, for had I known of any murder plans the unfortunate Marquis de la Bonnière might still be alive. I came to Paris solely on a 'hunch,' which is another piece of our American slang. It signifies an intuitive feeling which is deeper than knowledge itself.

"I had slim evidence, but as none knows better than yourself, monsieur, slim evidence is better than no clew at all. It was my intention to be on hand in the event that any crime would be attempted. Obviously this crime had been well planned some time ago, and my insufficient information was unable to prevent it. But I believe, messieurs," added Raynor, now addressing the entire group, "that I have sufficient information to get to the bottom of this crime."

The words were uttered with conviction and in no spirit of vanity. The prefect's features lighted up at the disclosure.

Clement Raynor rose from his chair.

"You are quite certain of your grounds, M. Raynor?"

"I am. Friday, between four in the afternoon and eight in the evening, we shall together march back with the perpetrators of this crime, and we shall have broken up the biggest ring of diamond thieves in existence."

The prefect also rose. With the identity of the erstwhile prisoner unquestionably established, the officer extended his hand in felicitation.

"Monsieur has his own plans, beyond the doubt," he said, "and I shall not encroach on his work. If you have any request to make, it shall be an extreme pleasure to assist you."

Raynor did not hesitate.

"May I ask if it is publicly known, as yet, that Le Marquis de la Bonnière has been murdered?" he inquired.

"We have not yet released the story to the press. No journalists are aware of Bonnière's death."

"Excellent!" exclaimed Raynor. "Splendid! Could you release a report not entirely true?"

"It is often done, monsieur—for good reasons."

"Then give out a white falsehood to the press. Have the story read that a murderous attack has been made on the person of the marquis, with the object of stealing the historic Karma; that the attack failed, however, as the marquis will recover and the Karma has not been lost. Also, that the condition of the marquis prohibits his seeing any one except his physicians."

With the assurance that on the morrow the Paris newspapers would publish this falsehood, Clement Raynor departed from headquarters. Now his work was cut out for him. In his pocket lay a permit from the police admitting him to the Bonnière mansion.

VI.

His first act was to make use of this permit. In a thorough investigation of the premises, aided by the gendarmerie, he found a trapdoor in the cellar. It was locked from the inside.

This was puzzling, but not completely disconcerting. The door led to an areaway which ran into a spacious sewer.

In other days when revolutionary terror had gripped Paris, this exit had probably been utilized as a secret avenue of escape for harassed nobility. It could prove as secret an entrance today as an exit in the older days.

The following day, Thursday, was spent in preparations. The prefect, with the coöperative spirit of a man who is truly important, placed himself at the disposal of Raynor. It was ar-

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ranged that the prefect and two of his picked men, properly disguised, would be on hand when Raynor gave the word.

Friday, at five in the afternoon, two plainclothes men appeared at an old building in a crooked little street of the Montparnasse district. Entering nonchalantly, they asked for the proprietor.

When that individual appeared, he was promptly and noiselessly whisked off to police headquarters. He may have been as virtuous as he represented himself to be, but it was essential that there should be no possible leak in the nature of a warning.

The house was quiet and sleepy in appearance. At six o'clock the same two plainclothes men entered the building with Raynor and the prefect.

Search of the premises revealed that on the second story was only one man, a bushy-haired youth with sallow cheeks. He was the only occupant of his room, and he yielded quietly to the brace of guns which were pointed at him.

Securely gagged and trussed up in a manner familiar to police methods when haste is required, the bushy-haired man was concealed in the damp basement of the house.

Leaving nothing in disorder, the detectives removed a grating before an old fireplace which had seemingly been in disuse for some time, and secreted themselves in the large mold of the flue. Raynor replaced the grating so that it could again be dislodged with a gentle shove.

A large door, with the lock rusty and unserviceable, led to a big and old-fashioned clothes closet. On a heavy shelving in the upper reaches of this recess, the prefect climbed and lay hidden in waiting.

No more was to be done here, except to wait for a signal from Raynor, who held in his hand a pass-key to the only entrance to the small apartment. The key had been taken from a large ring, the former property of the proprietor, and the use of this key upon Raynor's entrance later into the same large and ill-furnished room would be the signal.

Clement Raynor took a second leave. It was now seven thirty.

Picking up two of the prefect's men waiting a square down the line, Raynor hopped with them into a waiting taxi-auto. Traffic was light, owing to a heavy rain, and in a few minutes the party emerged at the Gare du Nord, the Paris railroad station for boat trains from America.

There another taxi was engaged to wait; the driver was officially ordered to accept no other fare, and to be ready for any one of the three men who might step into his machine.

It was close to eight thirty when a stream of travelers began to pour from the further recesses of the station. A train had arrived, porters were running about, interpreters and cab drivers were lined up for business.

Clement Raynor, waiting at the side of the building, saw one particular passenger who excited his interest. Raynor nodded to his comrades, and when the passenger engaged a taxi and entered with his hand bag, the two detectives entered another taxi.

Raynor walked to the second machine which had been ordered to wait, and the two cars trailed the first one to the Montparnasse district.

At the same building which had recently witnessed so much activity on the part of the French police, the first automobile stopped. A passenger alighted and entered the house.

Across the street, separated from each other by a few rods, were two men who had not been in evidence earlier in the evening. One leaned against a doorway, while the other paced up and down. Before each, a taxi halted.

Out of one issued Raynor, who pressed a gun into the man leaning against the doorway. The pacing man was at the same time apprehended by

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the two plainclothes men from the other cab.

Taking both prisoners and manacling them, one of the prefect's aids bundled them into the automobile and rode with them to headquarters. The other remained on the pavement in the rain, while Clement Raynor entered the rickety building.

With two probable sentries out of the way, the road was now clear. Raynor was on the second floor in less than two minutes after the entrance of his quarry into the building.

He had kicked off his low shoes. He crept along noiselessly, and noted that the door to the apartment was closed, and probably locked. Raynor stooped and pressed his ear against the keyhole.

"Bunglers, stupid bunglers, the whole damned lot of you!" some one was storming.

Raynor smiled. He recognized the voice.

"But how so?" queried another voice. "Is it not that everything has been made to your satisfaction, *monsieur?*"

"Satisfaction!" stormed the first voice. "The marquis recovers, the Karma remains in his possession, he is warned in good style, and you ask whether everything doesn't satisfy me!"

A hoarse laugh followed.

"So yuh fell flat fur that boloney," laughed a third man, quite evidently an American. "Baby! That's a good one, chief."

"Fell for what?"

"The story in the papers. The hull thing's a fake, passed out by the jendarmies—the cops. Why, chief, the markis is deader'n King Tut, an' the Karma's in a vault at the Banque de Mosque. That's the low-down, chief."

"You mean that the newspaper reports are false?"

"Not false, they're just lies, boss. I slit the win'pipe o' this ol' markis gink with a razor, an' it went so deep I didn't take time to pull it out again. Gene here eloped with the Karma. Him an' me was planted in the château fur two days, almost, under an old trapdoor leadin' into the cellar from a sewer.

"The day before I jobbed into the house an' lifted the hook off'n the ring, and slipped a thin wire round the hook an' through the slit o' the trap, so's we could lock the door just like nobody'd ever been through it. I yanked the wire then; it came off, an' left no evidence. Kinda smooth, boss. Wot?"

There was silence.

"Well, well!" came the first voice. "So you followed out my orders to the letter. Clever work, Mugs. You did well, too, Jean. But that press getting the wrong story — there's something phony there, I'll be hanged!"

The exclamation was one of contemplative surprise, but no more surprising than what followed an instant later.

There was the rattle of a key in the keyhole. At the same instant, when all eyes in the room were attracted to the door, there came the sound of a falling grating. The next thing to be heard was the voice of the prefect, who spoke even as he leaped from his perch on the shelving.

"Not hanged, *monsieur,*" came the prefect's voice, "but guillotined. In France we sever the head from the body."

The door was opened by one of the plainclothes men who had crossed the room from the fireplace, while the prefect and the other detective stood with automatics pointed at the three conspirators.

The surprise had been complete, and Raynor noticed the intense astonishment on the faces of the three men as he entered the room—particularly on one face.

"Clement Raynor!" grasped one of the men as he stood there, his hands held high above his head.

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"That's it!" Raynor agreed. "I made rather a rapid journey from the beach at Waikiki, don't you think so?"

At the order of the prefect the three prisoners were handcuffed, while Raynor drew on his wet shoes.

"Well, I'll be hanged!"

That was all that the flabbergasted Perry Emlin seemed to be able to say, in spite of the prefect's assurance that such was not the form of execution in France.

Raynor slowly wiped his hands on his handkerchief, and looked up smilingly.

"How were the orange blossoms at Beverly Hills, Emlin?" he asked.

Emlin disregarded the question.

"It's worth my neck," he said, "to find how you got the drop on me, Raynor. Unless I'm goofy, I saw you and heard you on the Honolulu boat."

Raynor passed his cigarette case to the prefect and his aids, took one himself, lit it, and then sat himself down on a rickety chair.

"No, you're not goofy, Emlin," he said. "You have erred on the other side of the ledger. You were entirely too bright, and realizing that, you could scarcely believe that anybody else in the world could clash with you and come in better than second best. I think I ought to tell you a little story, and at the same time enlighten my colleagues here who have been of such service to me."

He nodded to the prefect and his aids.

"We who live by our wits," he continued, "must be well supplied with them or perish. A little over a month ago I had cleaned up a diamond robbery in Chicago, and to my disappointment I found that you had not been mixed up in it, Emlin. That only convinced me that the Chicago job was too small for you. You would go after the bigger fry, such as the South Africa affair of last year. I suspected you then, and trailed you from Johannesburg to Alexandria, and then to Paris, but I could get nothing on you.

"You remained in Paris several weeks. I shadowed you, but the most that I learned was that you had your lieutenants here, and that you used this building for a rendezvous. I noted the address, and followed you to the States. Nothing broke there, and I was called off your trail on a few other jobs.

"Immediately after cleaning up the Chicago affair, my firm — Van Saale, Limited, of Amsterdam, I am pleased to inform you—cabled me in code that the Marquis Henri de la Bonnière was negotiating with the Emir of Bokhara for the historic Karma. Since it seemed likely that the great stone would again be in circulation, they asked me to keep it under watch.

"Right then and there I made up my mind that the Karma was game such as you like to stalk. Instead of going abroad, I cabled my firm and got *carte blanche* for my activities; also, I learned from them that the information of the negotiations for the Karma was not common knowledge, at least at that stage of the proceedings.

"Now, who would be more likely to learn of the matter than you, through your network of spies, agents, fences, cutters and what not? I knew that you were in Los Angeles, and I went there to keep you under my eye.

"Coöperation with the police of Los Angeles enabled me to get word from the telegraph agency whenever you received a message. Sure enough, one message, rather equivocally worded, indicated that you were being apprised of the negotiations for the Karma. Your movements from that instant were never beyond my knowledge.

"I could see that you were a suspicious and wary fellow, who made few friends and watched them all. You rightfully distrusted that I was not the automobile salesman I had represented myself to be when I managed to make your acquaintance."

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"That's right, I knew damned well you weren't." The words fell almost unconsciously from Perry Emlin's lips.

"But your distrust of me was rather obvious, Emlin. It never was more obvious than when you faked your trip to Beverly Hills, awaited a later train out of Los Angeles, and turned to camp on my trail to see whether I really was going to Honolulu. I saw you on the boat, and made it a particular point that you should see and hear me. That's why I came out into the passageway and talked to that bath-steward."

Perry Emlin's jaw dropped in surprise, and remained low in consternation over having been duped in a battle of wits.

"My passage," continued Raynor, "was all a designed fake. Dan McMahon, of the plainclothes squad, arranged it for me at the last minute. I knew it was necessary, for I knew that you'd check me up. And when you did, and then when I turned and trailed you and saw you get that midnight train, I knew that only one thing could inspire all that caution in you—and that one thing was the Karma diamond. I knew that it behooved me to get here first. You see, I knew you of old."

"Thanks," said Emlin bitterly.

"I went by air to Chicago, beating you by two days. The details would not interest you, but I managed to keep two days ahead of you all the way to Paris, after learning in New York that you had booked passage on the Touraine for a sailing two days after mine on the Berengaria.

"I had not suspected that your organization was so smooth as to operate in your absence and have the booty ready for you on your arrival. This sad underestimation of your powers resulted in the death of the unfortunate marquis. However, since the Fates themselves seem to have decided against me, I can hardly be blamed for failing to save the life of the marquis. Karma itself was against me, I suppose.

"On last Wednesday evening I reconnoitered in the vicinity of Bonnière's home in the Faubourg St. Germain. I noted that it was well guarded, and sauntered down this way to have a look at your old rendezvous. I watched it for some time, and just before midnight I saw a couple of men enter.

"They were the two men here with you in this room at the moment, and one of them I recalled as having seen in your company when I trailed you before. A New York gunman's face is not hard to remember.

"Getting down to this evening, the prefect and these two aids secreted themselves in this room. First we ascertained that your ship was almost five hours late. We have your bushy-haired specimen downstairs in the basement. And we arrested two men outside who were not here the first time we came, but who seemed to be sentries."

"Gee, I wondered where that bushy-headed guy was!" exclaimed the hard-faced criminal whom Emlin had addressed as Mugs. "He ain't been any use anyhow. Down in the basement's where he belongs!"

"He won't be there long," said Raynor. "He'll be coming along in a few moments. In fact, we are all ready to go, are we not, *monsieur?*" he asked, nodding to the prefect.

"Ah, but certainly, M. Raynor," was the prefect's reply.

The manacled prisoners were marched off under the automatics of the two detectives. Raynor stepped aside to allow the prefect to precede him through the doorway.

"Ah, but after you, my friend," said the prefect of police, with a bow. "Authority should ever yield to genius, *monsieur!*"

THE END

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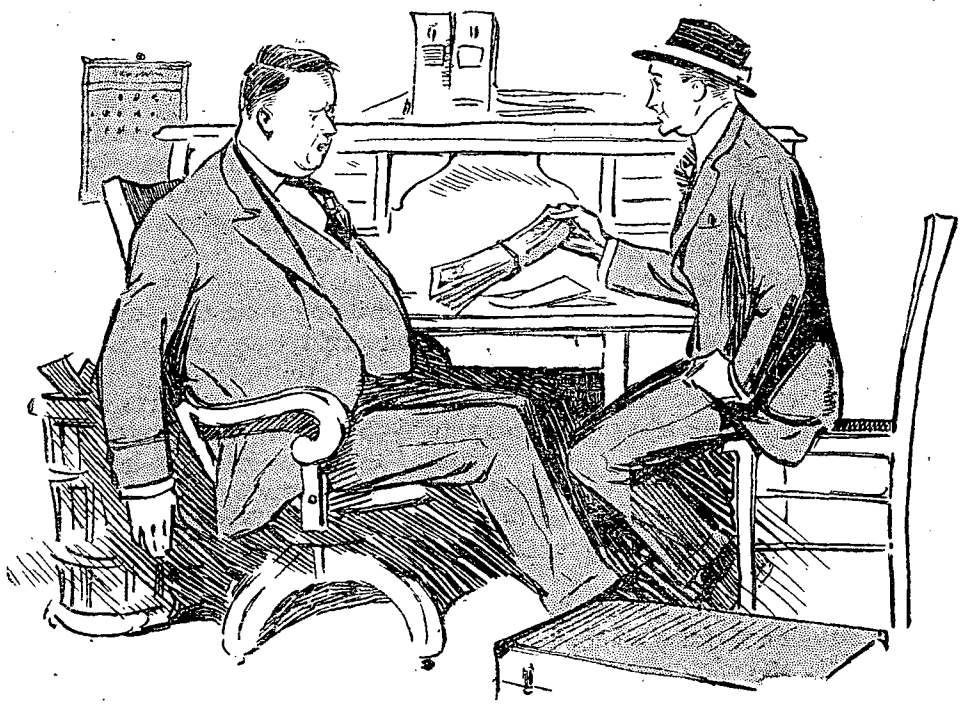

Now We're Rich

Every one wants money and imagines what he'd do with it. Do you think you would act like this husband or the wife or the children?

By EDGAR FRANKLIN

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

DURING his whole married life Henry Morrow had struggled along with his small export business, which made few changes and no progress, and his family, his young wife Laura, his sensible oldest daughter Ina, the modern William and Margery, had lived as comfortably as most in Wellmont, Long Island, with the usual complaints and longings. Then old Prindle died; and because he had always liked Henry, on his deathbed he sold him his handsome one hundred and forty year old house for the exact cash which Henry possessed. When they moved in, an old wall safe was found to contain shares of Manikoma oil, which was booming on the market, and their shares had reached a hundred thousand dollar value and was still rising. Henry upset all the family's plans by refusing to use the money until he was sure he had a right to it. Meanwhile, his family acted as though they were rich, and Henry himself made arrangements to move into better office quarters with new equipment. Jim Brantree, Laura's brother, had been staying with them while a financial defection in his company, at-

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for June 16

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tributed to him, was being investigated. Peter Salton, the younger brother of the company's owner, appeared at the Morrow home, and, saying he was tired of waiting on Brantree, suggested he return the money.

CHAPTER IX (*Continued*)

IMPENDING CHANGES.

SALTON'S heavy brows came down and he peered steadily at Brantree. If Laura had expected that her brother was about to fly at the man's throat she was disappointed. Brantree smiled weakly, brokenly, and swallowed.

"That—that's the first time you've actually accused me, Mr. Salton!"

"In so many words—yes, perhaps it is. But I've been accusing you mentally for quite awhile, I'm afraid. Good Lord! Have an end of it, Brantree! I've tried to be nice; I've tried to do everything under the sun that would give you another chance; but I'm not a congenital idiot!"

"Mr. Salton!" Laura began hotly. "May I say just one thing?"

"I wish you wouldn't!" Brantree cried.

"Well, I will! If you dare accuse my brother of—"

"My dear lady!" broke in the powerful bass, as the big man heaved about and faced her impatiently. "I appreciate fully your personal view of this matter. It couldn't be other than it is, of course. And you have my most sincere sympathy, Mrs. Morrow—and that, I may add, is one reason for my wishing to talk privately with Brantree. But we are down to brass tacks now, I think, with the personal element quite eliminated. This is business!"

"But—"

"The facts remain just what they have been since the beginning. Your brother was alone with that forty-five hundred dollars, madam; indeed, the last time I laid eyes on it, it was in his hands. Some fifty minutes later the money had left the safe and disappeared. If you have an adequate explanation of all that which absolves your brother, it could reach no ears more receptive than mine. Well?"

"I—I haven't, of course. But I *know*—"

"Doubtless," Salton agreed with a perfunctory smile. "But I canceled a dinner engagement to run out here and talk to Brantree and I would like to get back for some of the dancing. So—"

"Yes, I think you'd do well to keep out of the conversation, Laura," Henry said rather apologetically.

Laura's lips tightened; she glared at Peter Salton in the most unfriendly way—and Peter turned back to Brantree.

"Well? Are you going to refund?"

"How the Sam Hill can I refund what I haven't got?" the other demanded hotly. "I didn't steal your money, in the first place; I haven't forty-five hundred dollars in the world—or much more than forty-five cents just now. And if I had, Mr. Salton, I'm damned if I'd give it to you!"

Salton arched his brows and shook his head.

"It's a rather foolish attitude, I should think, Jim. You haven't a leg to stand on; that's one reason I've taken your part, you know; to save you from yourself."

"But I tell you—" Brantree screamed.

"Don't! I've all but come to blows with my brother over this affair; he'd have had you arrested within ten minutes and he's cursed me for a plain fool, not less than twice a day, ever since, for insisting that you be allowed time to run loose and think it over. I'm rather a psychologist and, so far, you've justified my guesses. That is to say, I was fairly certain you wouldn't bolt, and you haven't. I'm

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also fairly certain that you'll hand back the money."

"Well, that's where your psychology's going to take an awful tumble!" Brantree said bitterly. "*I haven't it!*"

The visitor, staring steadily at Laura's brother, twiddled his big thumbs for a little.

"Odd! Oddest thing I ever saw!" he muttered. "Brantree, I've made my brother agree to one thing."

"Yes?"

"If you'll repay the forty-five hundred, he'll consider the matter forgotten, so far as the firm's concerned. That is to say, you'll be able to go somewhere else and make a fresh start without having to feel that this bit of your past is likely to leak out. It was a job, making him do that!"

Brantree threw up his hands.

"I suppose it was nice of you—and thanks!" he cried. "But it doesn't help much, does it? If you want to arrest me, go ahead and arrest me. That's all I can say now."

"I give it up!" Salton breathed. "I don't understand it. Why, Jim, you *know* that that means ruining your whole life, don't you?"

"Of course I know it."

On twiddled the thumbs and on and on. Very suddenly, Mr. Salton rose.

"I've done absolutely all I can!" he said. "I'll hold my brother off as much longer as I'm able—and that will not be for very long now, I'm afraid, because—" He turned abruptly to Laura; curiously, indeed, he had ceased to be a big business man and was utterly human. "It's all beyond me, you know! Jim has always been such a good kid—*always*. Faithful, hard working, dependable as a man twice his age, liked by everybody. I'd have trusted him as readily as I'd have trusted my own brother, Mrs. Morrow."

"Well? Why not?"

"That's just it!" Salton laughed helplessly. "Standing here, looking at him, I'd still trust him, ridiculous as that sounds. I mean to say, I am positive that some momentary, crazy impulse overcame him, something that never happened before and will never happen again—and he simply cannot bring himself to admit it." He turned back to Mr. Brantree; a big hand fastened on Brantree's shoulder and Salton shook him lightly. "Oh, come! Come, old man! Get out of this with a whole skin while you can!"

"How?" asked Brantree.

The hand dropped away from him. Peter Salton puffed his cheeks for an instant, compressed his lips, looked at Laura and looked at Henry and smiled ruefully.

"No use, apparently," he muttered, and picked up his overcoat and hat—and paused and sighed at Brantree: "I may as well tell you, Jim: yesterday my brother insisted on knowing where you were. A man is likely to turn up with a warrant almost any day."

Brantree only nodded. The visitor buttoned his overcoat, hesitated again, and then laughed grimly.

"I've let my brother call me half-witted about this business and threaten to have me confined," he said. "I may as well go a step farther and say that if you're going to disappear, Jim, you'd better do it almighty soon. And I'd thank all three of you to forget that remark."

"I have no intention of disappearing," Brantree said, thinly but steadily. "I'm not guilty, and I won't run. I may not be in this house or in Wellmont, but if I shift I'll tell you in advance where I'm going."

The big man spread his palms.

"I suppose that's up to you, Jim," he said, as he started for the door.

Just audibly, a car more expensive than the one the well dressed young man had tried selling Henry whined down the block and around the corner. Brantree also spread his palms, in forlorn mimicry.

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"And that, as I said before, is *that!*" said he. "It's all over but the shouting!"

CHAPTER X.

RELIEF.

HENRY considered his cigar.

"He was decent about it," he said gloomily.

"I suppose he was," Laura agreed grudgingly. "If it's decent to accuse Jim of stealing."

"Don't be silly," her brother laughed. "What else could he do? What else can he believe, Laura? I'm not blaming Peter Salton. He's white. Lord knows, he's giving me every chance."

"Did seem to be doing all he could, didn't he?" Henry mused, and gazed at the fire.

He was thinking hard; he had been thinking ever since Salton's first appearance; now he was reaching his conclusion. Brantree lighted a cigarette, giving the match an airy flourish. Henry noted that his fingers were shaking, though.

"He would, naturally. That's the sort he is, Hank. But I guess it's gone beyond his control now. Must have, when he'll come right out and accuse me that way. Well—I think I'll clear out to-morrow, my children. No use getting you two into the papers and embarrassing the kids by having a couple of husky dicks yank the desperate criminal out, while the neighbors gape."

"You stay right here," Henry commanded with a vast, easy effect. "Nothing has happened, and nothing's going to happen."

"Isn't, eh?" Brantree laughed. "I wish I could feel that way about it."

"You can," Morrow advised him and rose, smiling benignly.

Laura glanced up with:

"Where are you going?"

"Just upstairs for a few minutes."

Brantree studied the smile and started; he also gripped Henry's arm.

"Wait a minute! What are you going up there for?"

"I want to get out a little Manikoma oil, Jim," Henry grinned. "I'm taking it in to-morrow morning as security for a loan.

"A forty-five hundred dollar loan?" Brantree asked thickly.

"Um—possibly."

"To—to pay Salton?" the other choked on.

"Listen to me, young fellow," Henry grinned, and laid a hand on his shoulder. "There's no cause for excitement. Some of that money might better be working while I'm trying to make up my mind; and you can be dead sure I'm not going to let Salton get away with anything. I intend to take along a lawyer and fix things so they have to pay me back when—when we find out who did do the stealing."

"No!" Brantree shouted. "Absolutely nothing doing, Henry! That's equivalent to a confession!"

"Piffle!" said Mr. Morrow. "It is merely—"

"Laura, do *you* want him to do this?" her brother demanded.

"Well, knowing the struggle Henry has been having with himself about that money, it's rather a triumph to—"

"That's not what I'm talking about! Do you want him to pay money back that I—I never took?"

"There's nothing else to do," Laura said quietly. "You can't possibly go to prison, dear."

Brantree's excited hands dropped to his sides. Chest heaving, he looked blankly from Laura to Henry and back again.

"Well, then—well, then, *you* both think I'm guilty, too!"

Henry's benign smile was gone. Funny, you know, that he should think such a thing at a time like this, but it *did* seem to Henry that Brantree was overdoing it! Ostensibly, he couldn't believe him guilty, of course, but—but

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—well, there was something about that fool pose! He didn't look like such a thundering innocent man; he looked like a man trying his darnedest to look innocent!

"No, we don't think you're guilty, but there's only one way—"

"Well, you're not going to take it, Hank! Get that! *You're not going to take it!*" Brantree cried in sudden fury. "I've said it before and I say it again: they can keep me in jail for a million years and I'll never confess to a crime I didn't commit!"

"Fine! How about Laura? Do you want her to cry her eyes out during the million years?"

"I don't believe she would! She'd rather see me in jail than have me admit a thing like that!" And this sounded to Henry like a lot of flamboyant rot, too. "Wouldn't you, Laura?"

Laura sighed and smiled.

"I haven't quite reached that plane, Jimmy. No man, innocent or guilty, is ever freed from the stigma of a prison sentence. It's shameful—yes. But what Henry proposes is the only thing to do."

"I can't see it!"

"Well, whether you can see it or not—"

Brantree's grip was still on Henry's arm. Now it tightened, and Brantree smiled wildly.

"Listen to me, Hank! I won't let you do it, do you hear? Oh, don't look at me as if you thought this was all preliminary to weakening and giving in and—"

"I'm not!" Henry puffed.

"Yes, you are. Because it isn't, I assure you. You hand Salton a ten-cent piece and I'll confess to stealing his money and I'll confess to everything else that comes into my mind—murder, arson, grand larceny, anything!"

"That," said Henry, "is plumb loony!"

"Yes, I guess it is," Brantree answered more mildly. "But it'll give you an idea of how I feel about it. No, Henry. That stuff's just out of the proposition. I want your word of honor that you'll not try anything of that kind?"

"But—"

"Because, after all, it's my mess and not your mess, and I'll get out of it with my skirts clean or stay in it! Promise me, Hank."

"Well, but—"

"Henry, I want that promise from you, and no nonsense about it!" said Brantree's ugly little bark, and his chin was thrust out.

"All right, then!" Henry also barked in his exasperation. "Take it and be hanged! But I must say it seems pretty dumb to me."

"It's just another of those questions of the viewpoint, I guess, Hank," the other murmured grimly.

Laura sighed and made pretense of returning to her magazine. Henry wandered over to William's neglected pet, turned the switch and twisted the dials.

"Anybody know what's good on the radio to-night?" he asked drearily.

"See if somebody isn't singing 'The Prisoner's Song,' Hank," Mr. Brantree chuckled. "I'd like to learn the words."

Brantree was nervous at breakfast.

To be sure, as the just Henry reflected, any man about to feel the strong hand of the law may well be a bit uneasy; but Brantree had also taken to watching Henry in the same narrow, following way he had come to detest in his children. He didn't get the point of that.

Until now, Brantree had been the one who merely glanced questions in his direction now and then. This morning he watched Henry's goings and comings, followed him upstairs, came down with him, even remained with him when he went to the door and kissed Laura good-by.

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Laura was subdued, too. The children, obviously sensing something new, asked no questions; but Henry did find William and Margey holding underbreath conference in the living room.

All in all, he was glad to get down to the old office, where the most distressing factors were Miss Flint's little cacklings as she packed this, packed that, lost the other thing—and, of course, Lohman's resurrected bits of the past.

Lohman went around counting the minutes, too, which stretched from now to his last Saturday afternoon in the old shop; very much, Henry assumed, as a man counts the minutes between himself and the electric chair.

Heavenly day! Why couldn't the old man snap out of it and come along to the new place, if only for a couple of weeks until they were straightened out, and so break the oppressive pall? But he couldn't, evidently. Suggestions to that effect Lohman met only with a shake of the head and that harrowing smile.

Charlie Easton, who was taking Lohman's place as bookkeeper, called and was approved. A nice chap, clean-cut, energetic, level-headed, looked straight at you when he talked. But when he had conversed with Charlie for half an hour Henry found himself wondering hazily why, in this unfriendly world, one has occasionally to hire perfect strangers. It was a distinctly uncomfortable sensation and persisted for many minutes; he was so glad to see Miss Flint, when she hurried in presently, that she blushed again.

Jim was weighing on his mind, too. He spent much time wondering what was happening to Jim this day. At luncheon hour he went around the block, that he might pass the newsstand and look over the scareheads on the early evening editions. They had nothing to say of arrests in Wellmont, nor had those he inspected later on his way to the station.

All in all, Henry was glad to get back home, too.

He hummed as he entered. There were some problems around here, of course, with which he could have dispensed; but at least there wasn't a pathetic, moist-eyed old gentleman saying good-by piecemeal to apparently everything in the world that he cherished.

Henry's musical effort came to an end approximately thirty seconds later when Laura, with mysterious haste, drew him into the living room. This was a most unusual move; Laura, just then, should have been waving a gay spoon to him from the kitchen doorway. The unearthly calm that was on her dropped away immediately they were out of earshot of the rest of the family. Eyes big, Laura said softly:

"Jim's gone!"

"My soul!" Henry gasped. He had had no idea he'd feel like this about it when it really happened; for a moment he was all weak-kneed and sickish. "Pinched! Phew!"

"No, not arrested, Harry. He's just —gone!"

"Oh!" Morrow said relievedly. "Well, I'm glad he wasn't arrested, anyway. Where did he go?"

"I don't know."

"Wouldn't he tell you?"

"I didn't even know he meant to leave, Harry. In fact, I talked to him this morning when you'd left and tried to tell him how much we wanted him here and nowhere else. And—and then I went down town to order the roast and some other things for tonight, and at that time Jim was fixing the radio and said he had an hour's work ahead of him. When I came back he wasn't here."

Henry scratched his chin.

"I'd like to bet he went down and gave himself up, Laura," he muttered. "I'm pretty sure he had some such notion as that last night."

"He didn't, though. That was the first thing that occurred to me, Harry.

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I remembered what he said about telling Mr. Salton in advance where he was going, and I called up—I called up twice, in fact, the second time about five o'clock. Mr. Salton hadn't heard a word from him."

Henry continued to scratch his chin. He was not unduly excited; it was not his brother.

"Then I guess he's somewhere about town, Laura. Probably he got sick of moping around the house, and—"

"I tell you he has gone! He took his big grip and crammed almost everything he brought here into that. I've looked over his room, and all he left was a pair of shoes and an old suit and some worn-out shirts. I thought he might have left a note for me."

"And he hadn't?"

"Not one word. I'm—I'm worried, Harry."

"I doubt if there's anything to worry about," said Henry. "Jim's old enough to take care of himself and he knows best what he wants to do about this business. Why he didn't grab at the chance to get out of it all is beyond me; but I imagine that now he's gone away off somewhere to make a fresh start under another name. When did all this happen?"

"Why, I left the house a little before ten, and it couldn't have been much more than half past when I returned. I—I even went down to the station to see if I couldn't catch him, or find out. The agent remembered seeing four different men get aboard the ten eighteen with brown overcoats like Jim's."

Henry pinched her smooth cheek and smiled reassurance. Pretty rotten way to feel about it, but secretly he *was* darned glad Jim had vamosed like that. Explaining to Tom, Dick, and Harry why one's brother-in-law was arrested yesterday, up at the house, does not constitute the ideal conversation while one is riding to town in the smoker.

"You'll hear from him in a day or two," Henry said, as he removed his own overcoat and sighed comfortably. "He'll drop us a line as soon as he locates somewhere. Is dinner ready, honey?"

Yes, he seemed able to bear Mr. Brantree's defection with commendable fortitude. It is shameful, doubtless, yet Henry looked and felt more like himself at dinner than he had looked and felt for a number of days. He did not even frown at the too observant William's sudden:

"Hello! No place set for Uncle Jim?"

"He won't be here for dinner."

"Gone?" William inquired, and peered keenly at his parent.

"Yes, he had to go away for awhile," Henry said evenly.

William sat up, wide-eyed.

"So the bulls got him!" he gasped.

"Will!" his mother cried.

"No need of being coarse, Bill," Henry added amiably. "Your uncle wasn't arrested—no. He went away for a little change, I fancy."

"I'll say he did! He had to fly the coop!" William muttered in his charmingly direct way. "Well, can you tie that? Say, I've been wondering how long it would be before he had to—"

"He didn't *have* to go at all!" Laura interrupted hotly. "He is innocent."

"Well, he didn't look it, mother," William submitted. "I hope to tell you he didn't look it, and he didn't act it, either. Don't get me wro— I mean, don't misunderstand me, moms. I like Uncle Jim a lot. I—I hope they don't get him."

He wagged his concerned young head.

Laura's eyes, Henry observed, were spattering white fire.

"That's enough, Bill," he said warningly. "We needn't discuss Uncle Jim."

William nodded his grim understanding.

"Probably better not to, eh? O K," said he.

The spattering effect continued for

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a little; Laura was looking at her son without the usual thinly veiled adoration. William, after one glance in her direction, ate absorbedly. Henry remarked loudly that it was a fine evening, and nobody contradicted him.

"Say, dad!" William said suddenly.

"Eh?"

"Is that stock of oyurs still upstairs in the wall-safe?"

"It is. Why?"

"Well, say, I—I—" William's eye again met that of his mother just then. He swallowed noisily and followed the swallow with an emphatic cough, and the cough with a loud choke. "G-got something stuck in my throat," William wheezed. "Chok—choking to death!"

But he made quick recovery, and, thereafter, preserved a—for William—remarkable silence, glancing now and then at his father in the oddest way.

Henry gave no particular heed. This was the best roast beef he had taasted for some time—or else he was more capable of enjoying food tonight. The latter, he suspected. Fact, he hadn't at all realized what a nervous strain it had been, having Jim around!

William was excusing himself.

"Without your dessert?" Laura asked in amazement.

"Be down again in a minute," William said huskily and pointed vaguely at his throat.

Coughing, he hurried upstairs; and at the top of the flight the coughing ceased, and William's steps tapped hurriedly toward his own room. And shortly there was a loud, hard creak.

"What's he doing up there?" Laura demanded.

"How do I know?" Henry said.

"Well, you *do* know!" Laura flared. "He's moving the old desk in his room to look at that stock and make sure Jim didn't take it! I think it's perfectly beastly of that boy to feel as he does about Jim. I think—"

Her throat tightened.

"So do I, honey!" Henry agreed soothingly. "I can't understand it at all. He reads too many detective stories, or something of the kind. Boy's just a darned fool! I'll speak to him as soon as he comes down."

"Well, get your speech ready, pops," escaped Margey. "Here he comes, a-running."

She could have put it no more accurately. With two bounds which would have shaken a less solid house, William was crossing the upper hall; with five loud thuds he had negotiated the flight, skipping many steps. Now William was indeed with them again, and his eyes—which, everything considered, really should have been dulled and stricken—blazed triumphant excitement.

"Well, you're not rich any more, father!" he cried.

"What's that?"

"Nope! You don't have to bother making up your mind now. Uncle Jim lifted the whole bunch of stock!"

"He didn't!" Laura cried, as she came out of her chair. "I don't believe it."

"Did—did—did you take 'em out of there, Laura?" Henry managed.

"Of course not. I haven't seen them since the night Will found them."

"Well, they were there last night," William added helpfully. "I've taken a slant at 'em every night to make sure they were still there."

Mr. Morrow mastered himself and scowled. As a matter of fact, there *must* be something wrong with him! He felt as if a load had suddenly been taken from his shoulders; for a second or two he had wanted to cheer.

"Either of you kids been snooping?" he demanded of his daughters.

"Margey and I haven't enough strength between us to have moved that desk," Ina reminded him.

"I was just asking. I—I—Bill! You—er—well, of course they're still in the safe. Probably toward the back. Your uncle never—"

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"Well, if he didn't, somebody else did," William laughed. "Go look, if you like, but I ran my hand away in to the back, father. And—well, here; before you start, look at this!"

Henry scowled at the bit of torn paper William extended.

"What's that thing?"

"Don't you recognize it?" asked his son. "Don't you remember the part of the flap on that envelope that was almost torn off—the piece that had some sealing wax sticking to it? Well, this is it, and—gee, don't look like that, mother; you're not to blame! Well, this was beside Uncle Jim's bed upstairs."

"Er—lemme see it," Henry muttered.

"Is—it?" Laura asked with difficulty.

"Why—er—yes it does seem to be the piece from the envelope," Morrow said, and found himself unable to face her. "And if—well, if it really was beside Jim's bed—"

"It really was," William assured him less forcefully.

"Well, then, if it was—and of course it was—then it looks very much as if— Say, I wouldn't have believed it! He—maybe it's just as Salton said. Maybe he has crazy impulses and he can't resist 'em and— Oh, here, now, Laura, don't cry! No—no sense in crying about it!"

"Let—let me alone!" Laura sobbed into her napkin.

Ina was comforting her mother.

Margey stared straight at her father, and the rosebud mouth was a tight little pucker and in her eyes was a twenty-page indictment.

"And I never even got in to *look* at the blue one I wanted," she said rather cryptically.

"No, and none of the rest of us got a look at anything else, either," added William, and his voice dwindled to a little whine, causing Henry to glare at him suddenly. And it was quite as Henry had suspected! Again his son was the bent, pathetic child of direst poverty, the corners of his mouth down in a weak, underfed cringe.

"Well, that's how the story ended! That's how it ended," William whinnied feebly. "Now we're *not* rich any more; now we're just as poor as ever, eh? And, knowing how things run for this family, it couldn't have ended any other way, I guess. It—it's always like that!"

For an instant Henry's smile was positively evil. His son shrugged then and collapsed into a chair, limp hands sagging down on lifeless knees. His head wagged broken resignation. He laughed, dreadfully, as one might laugh over the grave of a dear one.

Henry sat down with a thud and cleared his throat.

"Everybody!" he said with a really commanding note. "Before we go on having hysterics, let's just look at the thing as it is!"

"Listen!" William put in forlornly. "Maybe if you telephoned and asked for a general alarm, they could get him before he hops the border?"

"Thank you; that's just what I want to talk about," Henry said tartly. "Laura, dear, stop crying, will you? Jim's gone, and there doesn't seem to be any doubt that he took the stock with him. I guess we all understand what happened.

"Jim's been brooding for a long while and—well, he was in a mess and he didn't seem to want to take the easy way out. I suppose he figured that—er—if he had plenty of money and went a long way off, he'd have a chance to reëstablish himself and start life again, and the means was at hand.

"Wouldn't surprise me at all if he began paying it back later, by installments. I don't know. Maybe none of us will ever hear from him again. But he's your mother's brother and she thinks a lot of him and—and so do all the rest of us, of course, and we don't want to see him in any more trouble. So, from this minute on, we're all go-

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ing to forget that there ever was any Uncle Jim!"

Laura faced him bravely.

"Hal, even if he is my brother, if he *did* do this, I don't see why—"

"Well, *I* see why, honey, and I guess the kids do, too," Henry said very gently. "So Uncle Jim is just something that never happened! Maybe you better serve the dessert, Ina."

Ina nodded slowly. Mr. Morrow surveyed his little family circle with a dry smile.

"Once in awhile, you know, your poor, decrepit old father has a hunch that's worth something. I mean, about telling you all to keep this dark in the first place. Now you don't have to explain what happened to the family fortune!"

William's head, bowed now on his hand, shook wonderingly.

Henry's poise remained quite as superb later, when he found himself alone with Laura, perched on the arm of his chair in the old way. He grinned up at Laura, but there was no smile in response.

"I'm wondering what will happen to him, Hal?"

"Nothing! What can? He has plenty of money. He's bright. Jim's not naturally crooked, Laura; he just lost his balance when the Salton thing broke and he hasn't got it back yet. He will."

The fire crackled for minutes. Henry watched it, with his head resting against Laura, and sighed lightly.

"I'm wondering what on earth to do about that decorating!" Laura mused further. "You see, I—I always thought that if we *should* be a little pinched for money, you'd have the stock to sell. So—"

"Yep. I know. Had a bad effect on all of us, kid. I suppose the decorating will have to wait."

"But Mr. Fiske was going to begin first thing Monday morning. He had to order special colors and special papers, Harry."

Henry, considering the fire, grinned no more. As yet, he had not mentioned his change of offices; he had intended that for a surprise. But until he had tottered out from under the burden of expense involved in that shift, they'd have to stand the cracks!

"Um—even so—" he began.

"And I've told several women that I'm having the place done over," Laura continued. "Mrs. Harrison, you know. A cousin of hers is an interior decorator and he came up to make suggestions. No, I didn't tell you; that part didn't cost a cent, Hal. And he made sketches for Mr. Fiske and colored them! What—what *am* I going to say?"

Henry's upturned eye was rather hunted.

"Means a lot of humiliation for you, honey," he muttered.

"Humiliation!" Laura echoed, and flushed even in the firelight. "There isn't a thing I can tell them but the truth!"

"Well—er—have it done, then! Yes, I mean it. I'm not going to have 'em talking about you, Laura, and—yes, go on and have it done, just as you planned.

"It won't hurt Fiske if he has to wait a month or two for his money."

The fire crackled on for another space.

"You're awfully decent, Harry—I mean about Jim," Laura murmured.

"Oh—that!" Henry said and laughed outright. "That's not decency, Laura; that's gratitude. I'm glad he stole the stuff."

"What?"

"Well, not actually throwing up my hat and cheering, of course; it *was* rather comforting to know the stock was up there for an emergency. But ever since we found out that Jim had walked off with it, I've been wondering if he didn't save me from the asylum."

"Was it as bad as all that?" Laura asked with a sad, whimsical little smile.

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"Laura, it was worse! You won't understand, I guess; I'm not sure I do. But if ever a thing had me guessing, that did! You see, I'd have liked that money pretty well, only to save my soul I couldn't figure out why Prindle should have left it to me that way—and I can't now. Those things simply don't happen. Shake your head all you like—they don't! And if it wasn't mine, whose was it?"

"Conscience—" Laura began.

"Wasn't even conscience, kid," Henry said frankly. "That was my mistake in the early stages of the struggle. It was just fear, I think. Fear of the trouble that might be coming my way if I brought all the money out into the light.

"I *know* somebody with a claim on Prindle's estate would have turned up to snatch it; and if they hadn't, Laura, you can be dead sure the State treasury, or whatever it is, would have got wind of the business and come after me, hell for leather! And then, the shock I'd get when all that happened used to send a good many chills through me, too."

Laura said nothing.

"So I'm well out of it!" Henry Morrow concluded, although wild enthusiasm did not ring in his tone.

Still Laura said nothing. The fire continued to crackle. Henry yawned and laughed quite boyishly.

"Let's go to bed early to-night," he suggested. "I feel as if I could sleep for a month!"

"It took a big jump to-day, too," said Laura. "It went up to two hundred and eleven. I looked in the evening paper."

CHAPTER XI.

CRIME'S AFTERMATH.

THE quality and influence of cold morning sunshine differ so vastly from those of firelight glow. Mr. Morrow, breakfast over, had found no difficulty in restraining his boyish laughter. Oh, he had slept dreamlessly, but the warm, impulsive feeling of gratitude toward the departed Brantree was not nearly so strong.

He had avoided the whole subject of the vanished gentleman with elaborate care; he had ignored the black depression which surged murkily through the whole house; he had not even appeared to notice Laura's swift doorward run at the postman's whistle—or her slower return with no tidings of her brother. He was not merry.

William, walking down to the train with him and resembling in every changing expression the finer type of early martyr, broached the forbidden subject before they were at the end of the first block.

"On the level, father," William said gloomily, "what do you think of it?"

"Think of what?" Henry growled.

"This stunt of Uncle Jim's—what else?"

"I think your uncle is a plain damned crook, Bill," Henry said harshly. "And don't repeat that to your mother."

"Well, do you think—"

"I don't think anything more about it," William's father said. "He cleaned up the whole pile and took it away with him, and he's not coming back. Now let it drop."

William's laugh was the tinkle of fine glass, forever shattered.

"Sure thing! But he had the right dope when he told you not to leave it in the wall-safe, didn't he?"

Briefly, Henry's smile was drear as Willie's own.

"Perhaps he had more information on what he was likely to do," he said. "And I was going to take that envelope to the safe deposit box this morning, too!"

This was the sad truth. At the very first, the find had been just a bit too weird to register in Henry's practical mind as tangible reality. Later—within the first twenty-four hours, indeed—faint uneasiness had begun to stir about leaving the stock up there; yesterday

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and day before, Henry had been downright nervous about it—and now James Brantree had relieved him of all cause for further nervousness.

And he was bouncing around in a pretty kettle of fish, too, was Mr. Morrow!

When the mail had been opened and the few letters dictated to Miss Flint, he sat down to watch the familiar figure at the press across the way and to try thinking it all out from a new angle. His original puzzle had been solved for him, but he had some fine fresh ones on hand this morning.

What with his recently signed lease for the new offices in the Kelfer Building, the entire new stock of furniture he had ordered, the decoration to be done by Laura, some money would have to appear. The only present possibility was some sort of loan.

If he meant to get a loan, it would evidently have to be through regular channels. His eye was dark as he called up Bennett's office in Wellmont and briefly stated his case. Bennett laughed thinly.

"Me? You mean me, personally? Nothing doing!" he said. "My few pennies are pretty well tied up just now."

"I didn't mean—"

"Tell you what I will do, though," the lawyer pursued, for his jewel-case contained no specimen of consistency. "I'll give you ten thousand flat for your house."

"Buy it? I don't want to sell it. I've just bought it myself."

"I know, but that gives you twenty-eight hundred clear profit. I'm just taking a chance on a quick turnover to oblige you, Morrow. If I have to hold it any time, I'm stuck—and stuck bad!"

Henry bit his lips.

"No, I'll hang on to the house, Bennett. Just how can I get a regulation mortgage?"

"In a hurry?"

"Well—yes."

"Lord, I dunno. First mortgage money's mighty tight just now. Of course, I can start hunting some, if you say so. How much it 'll cost you, I can't say."

"About how much?"

"Plenty!"

"We'll let it ride for a little," Henry grunted. "I may be in to see you some day soon."

"Well, if you want to take up that proposition of mine, you'll have to make it mighty soon," the lawyer said sharply. "I can't hold that open more than a day or two."

Mr. Morrow hung up with a bang. That unwholesome rat was talking on the assumption that Henry was badly pressed for ready cash, was he? Well, by the Almighty—well, no, the unwholesome rat was dead *right*! The savage flare left Henry's eye; he gave his teeth a cigar to work on, for his lips were beginning to suffer.

Now what? For one thing, he'd have liked to have his hands on Jim Brantree for about five minutes! His whole attitude toward the Manikoma stock seemed to have changed this morning. At last, perhaps, he was being honest with himself? What he had mistaken for conscience was really some sort of mental disease; all along he had been teasing himself, subconsciously, of course, for the sheer delight of the thing. He could see that, now that it was too late!

What an infernal ass he had been! A fortune in his hands and he had left it at the finger tips of a crook; and now the natural thing had happened and the vilest part of it all was that, however much Henry might deserve the blow, the family didn't deserve it!

Why, he could have bought them everything in the world they wanted—cars, rugs, clothes, jewels in a moderate way—and instead he had been mooning around, trying to decide, trying not to be afraid, taking every course but the logical one. Henry bared his teeth at the man across the way. Gosh almighty! *He had no brains at all!*

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Smoke filled the little office. Slowly, the pendulum swung back in the other direction. Matter of fact, now, *would* he have sold the stuff? It wasn't his money, any more than it was Brantree's money; Henry was still fairly firm on that point. He might have sold it and got into all kinds of complications.

Certainly, he never could have felt comfortable about the thing. It—well, maybe it *was* just as well that it had vanished, eh? Henry shook his head. He did wish that, with all these bills coming due, Brantree had postponed his latest theft for a little! Henry would have liked another week or so, to think it over.

However, Brantree was gone, now, and it behooved his brother-in-law to calm down and resume the hunt for ways and means to—

"Hello!" Brantree said lightly, as he entered.

"Hel—why, hello, Jim!" Henry faltered. "Where—where did you come from?"

The younger man closed the door carefully and set down his heavy grip. Grinning, he stepped to Henry's desk and tossed a too familiar envelope to the scarred top.

"There's your oil stock, Hank," he said. "Give me a light, will you?"

"But—but I thought—"

"Oh, yes, I know what you thought. You thought I'd stolen it. Well, I had, in the sense that I took it with me and—you busy?"

"Not very."

"I'll cut it short," Brantree sighed and took the other chair, which was split across the seat and lacked one rung in the back. "Hank, last night you were all set to give Salton the money I don't owe him, were you not?"

"I meant to do it—yes."

"I know you did; and as I have remarked on several other occasions, I'll see Salton and his children and his grandchildren frizzling in hell before I'll stand for that sort of thing. I thought you were going to sneak the stuff out of the house yesterday morning, and I kept an eye on you.

"You didn't, and—well, when the coast was clear, I packed my bag, looted the safe, and took your stock out of harm's way. And I meant to keep it there until things were squared with Salton. Oh, I'm not the first man to have a big idea go sour," Brantree laughed; "but the one thing in my head yesterday was to keep you from throwing away good money and doing my confessing for me. I—I've mulled over this mess until I think I'm a little bit crazy on the subject."

"Say! What—what are you trying to tell me?" Henry sputtered.

"The truth, Hank, no matter what it sounds like. I took a train to Albany, and I meant to put your stock in a bank up there and perhaps stay around the town awhile; you people must be pretty sick of looking at me. I thought I'd write you a mysterious letter, telling you that the Prindle money would be back when it felt it was safe to come.

"And then, last night, I couldn't sleep very well, and I had a lucid interval. It looked to me as if about all I'd accomplished was a lot more worry for Laura. And then there was always the chance that you'd start the police after me, and I can't afford to be arrested just now. So there you are, Henry. I'd put that stuff in a safe-deposit box if I were you."

"Yes, I—I'm going to!" said Henry.

The fellow was grinning at him again! What was it? The plain brass of a thoroughgoing scoundrel or the forlorn amusement of an utterly wretched man? It did suggest the latter. Was Brantree lying, or wasn't he? Well, of course he was lying! He had stolen the stock and then lost his nerve and brought it back. Although, as Henry had determined before this, Brantree *was* a queer duck

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in some ways, and he *was* Laura's brother.

And, anyway, the great consideration was that he had returned what he took. It was there! It was right in front of Henry. He could cart as much of it as he pleased around to the bank as security — er — that is, if he found himself forced to that extremity. He reached for the envelope and opened it.

"It's all there," Brantree said. "Hank, was Laura fussed?"

"Naturally! Cried her head off!" Henry snapped.

"Well, then—" Laura's brother pursued with difficulty. "Is it all right if—hell! I'm not asking this for myself! If it wasn't for Laura I'd get a hall room somewhere and hide, but she seems better satisfied having me in sight. Is it all right if I sponge on you for a few days more?"

Mr. Morrow melted suddenly. The fact that his fingers were tight closed about the precious envelope may have had something to do with the thaw.

"Don't be a nut!" he said heartily. "Go on home where you belong! Skip!"

His fingers remained about the envelope long after Brantree had departed. This time, he fancied, he wouldn't be so much bothered by conscience; this time, before his courage ebbed, he might negotiate a small loan, just for his own satisfaction, and—well, here! Wait a minute!

He had it now; the one point on which he really wanted reassurance. Seemed to have cleared up in his mind all of a sudden! He snatched the telephone and called for Wickett & Sobel, his attorneys, and asked for Wickett, who was big and deep-voiced and convincing.

"Say, Wickett," said Henry. "Having an argument with a fellow here in the office, and I want you to settle it. Won't take a minute. Suppose—er—suppose somebody left me some—er—money, say a couple of years ago, and I didn't know anything about it, and somebody else got it and—well, spent it, perhaps. There's no way I can get it back, is there?"

"Why isn't there?" the large voice demanded.

"Well, is there?" Henry asked.

"Morrow, any time anything like that happens to you, you come around here and let us take care of it for you. We'll get your money back if the other fellow still has it, and if he hasn't we'll fix things so that we can take anything he gets away from him as soon as he gets it!"

"Then that—that *can* be done, eh?" Henry said, quite weakly.

"What d'you suppose we got laws for?" asked Mr. Wickett.

Several minutes Henry drummed upon his desk, startled eyes fast on the envelope. Really, in the way of definite statements and conclusions, Wickett stood head and shoulders over anything that had come into the proposition so far!

He had helped Henry to an extremely definite conclusion, too; *if* he found himself driven into the very last ditch, he might possibly risk a loan on a little of the stock—but if anything like the Wickett pronouncement was impending, they'd have to prove to him that it was the last ditch.

He reached for his hat and buttoned his coat over the envelope in the inner pocket; he had a safe-deposit box right around the corner. And once the stuff was tucked in there it would be a mighty good scheme to thrust the whole matter of the Prindle money out of his mind. But it was a dog-goned big relief to know that it would be there in the box all the same!

The family mind, he discovered that evening, had essayed no similar thrusting! If anything, the more or less subtle influence of Mr. Prindle's queer bequest had increased tenfold. The black depression was all gone; a rather hectic gayety prevailed.

William, home ahead of him, wrung

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his father's hand and grinned from ear to ear as he breathed a heartfelt: "*Whatta y'know!*" Margey squealed as she kissed her father; even Ina seemed to be basking in the sunshine of a great contentment.

Laura was a young girl again, singing, beaming. She had baked a big cake and found some of Brantree's favorite artichokes in Wellmont, too. The only reason, Henry reflected grimly, that fatted calf wasn't on the table with all four legs sticking up in the air, was that Brantree detested veal!

But he made a point of getting Laura aside a little later, and telling her just how things stood, and how, by George, they were going to stand. Laura, after one demure smile, only giggled delightedly and hugged her husband.

There was a terrific interlude, wherein heavy pieces of furniture were wrestled up the stairs and into the guest chamber, and men came with pails and brushes and rolls of paper, and great expanses of dirty, paint-stained canvas which they spread over everything in sight — wherein ladders and boards rattled about, and wherever one wanted to step there seemed to be a bucket or a keg or a collection of sponges.

The family ate their dinners at the Little Thrush Tea Room, and commented that if they could get away with this kind of cooking and stay in business, Laura ought to open a similar place and make a million dollars.

In the down town section of New York, changes were going forward, too. But these were cold and methodical, and carried a nameless chill to Henry now and then.

As that late Saturday afternoon when old Lohman stood for ten minutes by the window, with his arm over Henry's shoulders, and rambled on about how Haines used to stand here and try to flirt with a blond pompadoured girl who worked in the window now occupied by the pressman, which belonged to an insurance office in those days; about how Dolly thought these offices, then all fresh, cream-colored paint, the nicest she'd ever seen.

And that last minute, when Lohman stood with his hand on the knob of the outer door and looked it all over just once more and then choked: "Well— g'-by, Henry! Best of luck!" and thumped slowly down the stairs. Why, it was awful! That's what it was— awful!

For a good quarter hour it seemed to Henry as if in some mystic way his whole business had gone downstairs and out with Lohman, and along with them hope and good cheer and the dear old past, and about everything else worth while! The secondhand man came that afternoon and made a price on all the fixtures which did nothing toward heartening Henry.

Wednesday morning, having gone a dozen steps past the Kelfer Building, he cursed himself briefly, turned around and walked back and was whizzed up to his new quarters in an express elevator. Some minutes he thrilled with pride as he entered; some more he thrilled with vague apprehension.

After that Henry moved dignifiedly to his private sanctum and sat down in the new chair before the new desk— which was too big; the next smaller size would have done as well, and it cost twenty-two dollars less — hoping that his mental state had not been too apparent to Miss Flint and the dapper young Mr. Easton. In point of fact, Henry was wondering just why he had done it!

Oh, a place like this lent a man some prestige, of course; given a little capital he might have cashed in on the prestige, but he lacked the capital. And it was beautiful, as offices go — big, clean windows, floors of some sort of composition and smooth as a billiard table, woodwork immaculate.

The furniture showed up better than

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he had expected, too, but—it wasn't Henry Morrow's furniture! It wasn't the kind of furniture Henry knew anything about. He was an uncomfortable stranger in a very strange land; even his collar didn't seem to fit as he sat here, listening to the busy sounds of Broadway, just around the corner now.

If it hadn't been for that damned stock of Prindle's he'd never have landed here, either! Oh, well, he'd shake down in time, if they didn't evict him for nonpayment of rent.

Miss Flint came hurrying in. She wore a brand-new gown; she was almost playful this morning.

"Now see what the very first letter in our new place brings us! I know it will be something good!"

"It is," Henry said, as he slit the envelope and started involuntarily. "It's the bill for this furniture."

"Oh, just the invoice," Miss Flint murmured disappointedly.

"No, it isn't an invoice—it's a regulation bill," Henry grunted. "I must say they didn't waste much time getting it here. Er—ask young Easton to come in, will you, Miss Flint? I want to talk to him. It looks as if we might have to shake up some new business pretty quick!"

He had not mentioned the change of offices at home. That, Henry had decided with a chuckle, was to be his own little secret. Time enough to spring it when things had settled down again around the house. And would they be astonished?

Why, say, they'd go wild, all of 'em! They'd been after him for years to get into decent offices; the chances were that they'd rise and cheer in a body, and insist on going down with him in the morning to look the place over. Privately he chuckled a number of times over the sensation he was about to create.

Things settled down at home on Friday, instead of on Wednesday. When Henry returned from a somewhat discouraging day, during which Charlie Easton had showed that he was just an ordinary young man, willing to be led, disinclined to lead, the dirty canvas had been whisked away and the pails and brushes were all gone.

Floors were oiled; Mrs. Harrison and her fool daughter, Joy, were in the living room with Laura, exclaiming and exclaiming and smoking cigarettes, both of them. It looked pretty nice to Henry, now that it was done; in fact, it looked darned pretty, the whole place!

But Mrs. Harrison, with her hands clasped, advised him that it was exquisite, and that only the Revolutionary Dagley Mansion, restored by one of the historical societies, had anything to equal that living room now!

He waited patiently until the scenic pair had departed and the family was grouped about an admittedly delicatessen dinner, with the courteous Donald Cray exclaiming upon the excellence of the cooked tongue one could buy in Wellmont.

They all seemed to be excited this evening, and inclined to chatter—tired with all the decorating, probably, and then there was some kind of dance at the Country Club which Marge and William were attending, Henry believed. Well, merciless as ever, he'd give 'em more cause for excitement!

"Oh—didn't mention it," he drawled. "I've moved."

"Moved?" Laura echoed.

"The office!"

"Why, Hal!" Laura said blankly.

"Well, it was about time!" William contributed. "Where'd you move to, dad?"

"Up into the Kelfer Building—tenth floor," Henry said impressively.

"Aha?" said William, and resumed his conversation with Cray.

Laura was still blinking utter lack of comprehension at her husband.

"Why, you—you didn't say anything!" she murmured.

"No—no," Henry grinned compla-

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cently. "Been keeping it as a surprise and—"

"You must tell me all about it afterward," Laura informed him politely, and turned back to her younger daughter. "You'll simply have to wear the red velvet, darling. I'm sorry, but I can't get that spot off the yellow silk, and there's no time to send it to the cleaner's. She has to wear her old red velvet to the Country Club dance, Harry!"

"She does?" said Henry.

Margey shrugged sadly.

"Well, there will be a lot of cultured people there, I suppose. Perhaps they'll appreciate an antique like that."

"Say!" cried William Morrow hotly. "How do you get that way—*antique?* What about *me?* How'd you like to be wearing a Tuck that's so old the moths are scared to walk on it for fear of going through a weak spot and breaking their necks?"

"I couldn't do that very well," Marge said sweetly. "This isn't a masquerade."

Laura was patting her daughter's shoulder. Cray was laughing in his rich, well bred way, and beginning a humorous discourse on the vanity of fine raiment.

Henry Morrow, it appeared, was at perfect liberty to take his nice, new little offices off in a corner and play with them, if he chose—but he'd have to do it all by himself. The launching of his big sensation seemed to have slipped somewhere; it had gone beneath the waves and quite failed to bob up again.

"Do you like your new offices, father?" asked the ever considerate Ina.

"Oh, yes! Fine!" Henry said to the canned beans on the plate before him. "Fine!"

What it amounted to, what there was absolutely no denying, was that something or other had happened to his family the very night they moved into this accursed old shack. And it was getting worse instead of better. It wasn't the same family at all!

CHAPTER XII.

THE DOWNWARD PATH.

THE society bug had bitten Laura. Hoping against hope, the fireside loving Henry had at first tried to pooh pooh away the notion. Conviction that this was a rather fruitless job came the night that Laura yanked him, with no decent warning at all, to dinner at the Harrison's, next door, where a paid cook cooked about half as well as Laura, and table was served by a silk-legged, white-capped maid who belonged nowhere but in one of the old time musical comedies the Morrows used to attend when they lived in Harlem and theater prices were lower.

Utter certainty settled in when he discovered Laura piloting him to the big Cartworthy house to play bridge, a pursuit at which Henry could make a roomful of enemies in almost no time.

Well, mainly, she would have to go it alone.

Morrow had too many other things to think about—the same old things, grown more irritating with the days. As, for one example, Jones, of the office furniture concern. Jones came blithely in one afternoon, a sheaf of papers in his hand. He greeted Henry with an airy smile; he hummed unconcernedly as he rustled through his papers, and at last he selected one and laid it on Morrow's desk with a grinned:

"Like to get rid of some money today, sir?"

"What's this?"

"Account to date, Mr. Morrow. O. K.?"

Henry tilted back in his new chair.

"Probably. I haven't looked through it. But what's the idea of this, Jones? Has anybody been suggesting that I'm on the verge of bankruptcy?"

"Mr. Morrow!" protested the other.

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"All right, then. When you sold me this furniture you told me I could take my own time in paying for it—one month, two months. What are you dunning me now for?"

"Oh, Mr. Morrow!" Jones laughed. "I'm not dunning you. About every so often the firm feels that it needs the money, I think, and sends me out collecting. I just take along whatever bills are due and trot around looking for people who are in the mood for writing checks."

"Well, I'm not one of 'em!" Henry said bluntly.

"Er—not to-day, then, Mr. Morrow?" queried the caller, and hesitated oddly for an instant.

"Not to-day, not this week and not next week," Henry answered.

For the most infinitesimal fraction of another instant, Jones seemed to be peering into the hidden depths of Henry's very soul. He found the exploration satisfactory. He smiled brightly, picked up the bill and replaced it in his sheaf.

"That's quite all right, Mr. Morrow," he said. "*Quite* all right!"

"I'm glad it is," Henry responded gruffly. "I'll mail your check shortly."

All of which, he conceded gloomily, was pure bluff, there'd be no check for Mr. Jones for quite awhile, unless something unexpected came in. And it was by no means quite all right, either; many things Henry disliked, but being hounded for money he loathed. If Jones knew how tight the cash really was around this shop!

It was just as tight an hour later, when Miss Flint entered, resplendent in another new gown—and how she did it on her salary was all past Henry—and advised him that Mr. James Brantree craved audience.

Mr. Brantree's brother-in-law was puzzled; they had parted at eight with no suggestion of an impending visit. His perplexity turned to alarm at the sight of Brantree's very tight little smile and the visible tension with which he waited for Miss Flint to close the door and move away.

"Something—er—up?" Henry asked softly. "I thought you were keeping out of New York as much as possible?"

"Rot! What does it matter?" Laura's brother asked, with a desperate little laugh. "Yes, something's up, Hank. I'm broke!"

"Eh?"

"I mean, stone broke, Henry. I've seen too many shows and bought too many clothes for myself and too many good dinners for other people these last years. I've been an improvident ass, because I had nobody depending on me for bread and butter, I suppose, and—well, the reserve fund didn't last very long. Henry, I'm down to my last fifteen dollars."

Morrow made no comment whatever. Two full seconds he did devote to wishing from the bottom of his heart that this person was not Laura's brother, though. Not that Henry was mean. Not that he was averse to helping his fellow man once in awhile. Only, just now—

He gazed morosely and expectantly at Brantree, whose cigarette drooped from the corner of his mouth, who picked at his right forefinger with his right thumb and stared straight back at Henry.

"I want to say one thing before I say anything else, Hank," he began jerkily. "I know your expenses are pretty heavy, and, if I'm asking too much—well, just say so, and we'll forget I ever came in here."

Henry nodded.

"No? All right. Go ahead, Jim."

"Well, it's like this. Grabbing at a straw, maybe; you'll probably think so. Er—Gallivan."

"Who's Gallivan?"

"The fellow who runs the private detective agency that's been trying to find out for me who did the Salton job. He—and another thing, Henry!" Brantree broke off, with his desperate

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little laugh. "I know you're not rich, but I know you're not down to fifteen dollars. I know you wouldn't have taken on all this," and he indicated the office in general, "unless you were pretty sure of swinging it. And that's why I thought maybe it wouldn't be too much to ask to—"

"Go on, about Gallivan!"

"He's a good sport, Hank. Yes, he really is. When he took the job he thought there was nothing to it. Recently it has been getting his professional goat altogether. I stopped in there on my way here, and he was so mad about it he was damning things around like a mule-skinner. He said—"

"I know," Henry interrupted sadly. "How much?"

Mr. Brantree winced and reddened.

"I want to borrow two hundred dollars, Henry. Gallivan said that if we came to the end of that with no results, he'd put in as much more—as operators' wages, of course—and then cross it off the books. It's the first case, he says, that has stopped him since he started the agency."

Henry played with his fountain pen and wished that the man was across the way, working at his press. He missed that man.

"What does Gallivan think about the chances, Jim?"

"He's honest. He doesn't know, except that he's going out on the case himself now and—Henry! if you don't want to lend me that money, don't do it! I'm pretty damned sick of the whole business; I can't sleep and I have to choke down food to spare Laura's feelings. On the dead level, I'd as soon go to Salton and let him do what he likes with me, right now."

"Well, yes, but if there's a chance—" the slightly startled Henry muttered. "*Is* there a chance that you can be cleared?"

"There's always a chance, I suppose, until they have me in jail, Hank. I *am* innocent, you know, and somebody *did* do it—somebody else!"

A mighty sigh wanted to emerge from Henry—a sigh so great that it must have shaken his whole anatomy for a second and then have left him limp. He stifled this sigh.

"That's right. We'd better take a chance, Jim!" he muttered, as he reached for his check book.

When Brantree had departed, after grateful stammerings which refused absolutely to ring true in Henry's ears, Mr. Morrow laid his check book away very tenderly and wiped the slight film of perspiration from his forehead.

And he gazed across the street, where there was nothing but pale pink sandstone and white-collared people moving briskly behind shining windows, and more than ever he missed the man who was condemned to the stamping out of little pieces of brass. While he was still part of the landscape, Henry had never quite appreciated that aproned individual as a focal point for calming meditation. Two hundred dollars! *Two—hundred dollars!* And gone!

Because so much of the old sympathetic understanding seemed to have evaporated from his home atmosphere, Morrow held his peace for several days regarding another source of worry. Then Brantree, who was growing downright haggard, went off to the pictures with Ina and her Donald.

The telephone tinkling, Henry found himself requested to shut off the radio during the first decent music that had come out of the air in a week. Alone in the silent living room, he was privileged to sit and listen to Laura's end of the conversation.

And it was enough to make a man get up and bite the furniture, that talk was!

Why, once upon a time, Laura had been able to speak and to laugh like a human being; in fact, her laugh used to be the prettiest and the heartiest Henry had ever heard come from a woman. Well, there was another

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thing that had been all changed around!

She was natural enough with the family, but when talking to a woman like this Mrs. Farnwell, who had called her up—a rather elaborate pouter-pigeon Henry had met just once, who wore a single diamond and that the size of an egg—when talking to that kind of people, you might have thought Laura was the duchess of something-or-other!

Every now and then Laura allowed an a to grow so broad that it would have stretched across the street. Without seeing her, you could feel her arching her brows and exclaiming over things that couldn't possibly matter to any one but an idiot, and giving a kittenish tilt to her head.

When she laughed it was a high soprano warble that made the hair bristle on the back of Henry's neck.

So when Laura had quite finished her conversation with Mrs. Farnwell, Henry, for some mystic reason, felt compelled to speak freely and at once.

"Say, honey!" said Henry.

"Why, yes?"

"Have we got a couple of young kids or have we not?"

"I believe we have," Laura dimpled, as she curled up on the couch and opened the fifty-cent fashion magazine that seemed to absorb her lately. "Why, Hal?"

"I was just wondering. I thought maybe my memory was playing tricks. I don't see much of them."

Laura shrugged. Henry scowled.

"Say, Laura! Do you know that Willie and Marge haven't been home *one* night since we moved in here?"

"Well—they're yo—"

"Yes, I know they're young. That's just what I'm talking about. Margey ought to be doing her lessons. William ought to be getting into bed and getting some sleep. Bill used to stay around two or three nights a week until he took to running with this curiosity next door. Margey went out Fridays and Saturdays, and thought it was a treat. Now they eat and run!"

Laura failed to contradict him.

"Bill gets home between one and two every morning and sings on his way to bed! He gets up looking like a boiled owl; and pretty soon they're going to fire him, Laura. A boy can't stay up all night every night and hold a job. Margey's either going to quit high school or stay there till she dies of old age. They'll never be able to graduate her at this rate."

"Well?" Laura said resignedly, and laid aside her magazine.

"Well, what I want to know, where's it going to end?"

"I suppose they'll come to their senses, Harry."

"I don't. They're my children, but I'm beginning to doubt if they have any senses to come to!" Henry said. "Bill's traveling with the Harrison girl exclusively?"

"Good gracious, yes!"

"I'm not keen on that."

"They're nice people."

"Never mind how nice they are; a boy that age gets no idea of life if he sticks to one girl that way, and particularly—Laura, Marge doesn't go out *every* night with the Burtis boy, does she?"

"I'm afraid she does, Harry."

"I'm going to put a stop to that!"

"How?"

"I—er—I'll speak to his father about it!" said Henry.

Laura laughed, in the old-fashioned way, however.

"But what will you say to him, dear? Tell him you don't approve of his son?"

"Tell him—er—tell him—well, I'll know what to say when I get started."

"Really, I wish you wouldn't get started," Laura said, quite soberly. "I think you'll make yourself rather absurd before you've finished, Harry."

"Why?"

"Because you're so likely to grow excited—and, after all, they're only

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children. Gerald's just twenty-one, you know, and he *is* a nice youngster."

"Say, does a nice youngster take a kid like little Margey and tear all over the country with her in an automobile every night? You don't know where they are! I don't know where they are! And the chances are if you asked 'em, they'd lie about it! Does a nice youngster do that?"

"Nowadays, they seem to," she murmured.

Mr. Morrow crossed his legs the other way and bit into his cigar. He seemed to be making very little headway with a woman in whom common sense had once been so shining a quality.

"And another thing—two more things, in fact!" he grunted.

"Yes, Hal?" Laura said patiently.

"First one: there's *something or other* afoot—something or other between Margey and Will!" Henry said very earnestly. "I have no idea what it is, but I know it's going on!"

"Oh, bosh!" said Laura.

"Bosh all you like, I tell you something's going on around here that I don't know about! Do you know what it is?"

"I do not!"

"Laura, do you think for one second that those kids can afford the pace they're traveling? That I can afford the new clothes Marge seems to need or that Bill can afford to spend every cent he lays hands on?"

This time Laura nodded gravely enough.

"No, I don't. I've thought of that."

"Pretty soon, Bill's coming to the end of his rope, in whatever fashion. What then?"

"Well, then, I suppose he'll be rather shocked and—why, probably take a brace and be that much better for his lesson," the new Laura said. "He's not heading for any real trouble."

"How do you know he isn't? Suppose this spending mania gets the best of him? Suppose—well, he's my son, of course, and I've tried hard enough to drum decent ideas into him—but suppose—"

"What you want to say is, suppose he found himself in some such predicament as Jim's?"

"Perhaps it is!" Henry said stoutly.

"We'd have to get him out of it and make very sure it didn't occur again," Laura answered, with much less assurance, and glanced oddly at her husband. "It couldn't occur, of course, but—"

"What *you* want to say," Henry laughed unpleasantly, "is that I could raise some money on Prindle's stock?"

"Perhaps it is!" said Laura.

Her husband shook his head.

"I thought something like that was wandering around in your mind," Henry muttered. "I can't figure out what that stuff's done to my family and the principles they all used to have. But it sure has done something!"

Laura opened her magazine and smiled tartly.

"Isn't it just possible that it may have waked us out of a long coma, Harry? Some of us?"

He was still occupied with his little puzzle two days later, when he came home—came home on the same train, at the same time, with the same newspaper in his right hand and the same healthy appetite for one of Laura's dinners, just as he had been coming home for years and years—and found Laura missing!

It was much as if the world had caught upon some interstellar snag and ceased its revolving! One good minute after Margey had told him that mother wasn't home yet and hadn't phoned either, Henry was still standing with his hat on the back of his head, trying to grasp the full significance of the phenomenon.

Oh, Laura had been away times enough before this, of course. Once or twice a month she went to dinner at the home of a relative, and sometimes

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Henry chose not to accompany her. But this was altogether different. Occasions of that kind were always arranged and understood well in advance. Laura left something ready to be warmed by Ina at dinner time, and Henry always knew just when she was coming back. But this morning Laura hadn't even mentioned that she was going out!

Mr. Morrow laid aside hat and coat and trudged into the kitchen, where Ina was boiling potatoes and looking around rather vaguely.

"Where's mother?"

"I don't know!" Ina said soberly.

"Didn't she stop at the store and tell you, or telephone or something?"

"No, dad. I—I don't know whether to heat up this pot roast from yesterday or—or whether mother planned something else for to-night."

Eyes growing rounder, Henry gazed at his elder daughter.

He was growing colder and colder and colder!

"Something's happened to her! She's been hurt!" he stated.

"Why, I hardly think that, father. We'd have heard."

"Not if she had been badly injured or—or killed," said Morrow. "She never carries anything to identify her, Ina; I've been trying for years to make her do that. Is the car out in the garage?"

"Yes, I looked."

"And she didn't leave a note anywhere?"

Ina shook her level head.

"No, father. Mother always props a little memo against the sugar box there, when she's going to be away. There wasn't a sign of such a thing. But I'm sure she hasn't been hurt. Wellmont isn't a big place, and we've lived here for a long time. Some one would have recognized her."

"They might—they might not," Henry muttered, and grew slightly paler as he looked around again. The emptiness of that Lauraless kitchen was no less than blood-curdling. She should have been over there, laughing at him—or over here, critical nose sniffing at steam from a pot—or else—

"I suppose the best thing I can do is to call up the police station and find out?" he said thinly.

"I think I'd wait, just a little while," Ina mused. "Mother's probably calling somewhere and they've had a late tea, or something of that kind. I think these potatoes are done, dad. Will you look at them?"

"How the devil should I know when potatoes are done?" asked the agitated parent as he turned away. "I never cooked potatoes!"

He hurried to the front of the house. Even now Laura had not returned—and he had been home fully five minutes! He went into the living room and gazed around, rather as if expecting Laura to pop out from behind a piece of furniture.

William, standing over the radio set, ceased snapping his fingers to the rhythm of faint music.

"Hello, dad! What do you know about this? Pittsburgh in daylight!" he cried loudly. "Not so bad? Big sister got the chow near ready? I have a heavy date this night!"

"You may not keep it," Henry said darkly. "Something has happened to mother!"

"What has?"

"I don't know, yet."

"How do you know anything has?" William inquired further, with some reason.

"She isn't home, is she?" Henry demanded harshly. "I—I'm going to call up the police!"

But he paused with his hand on the telephone—paused with a chilly film upon his brow and his heart hammering in his ears. A car was stopping outside, and the heart suddenly stopped with it! *They were bringing her home!*

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

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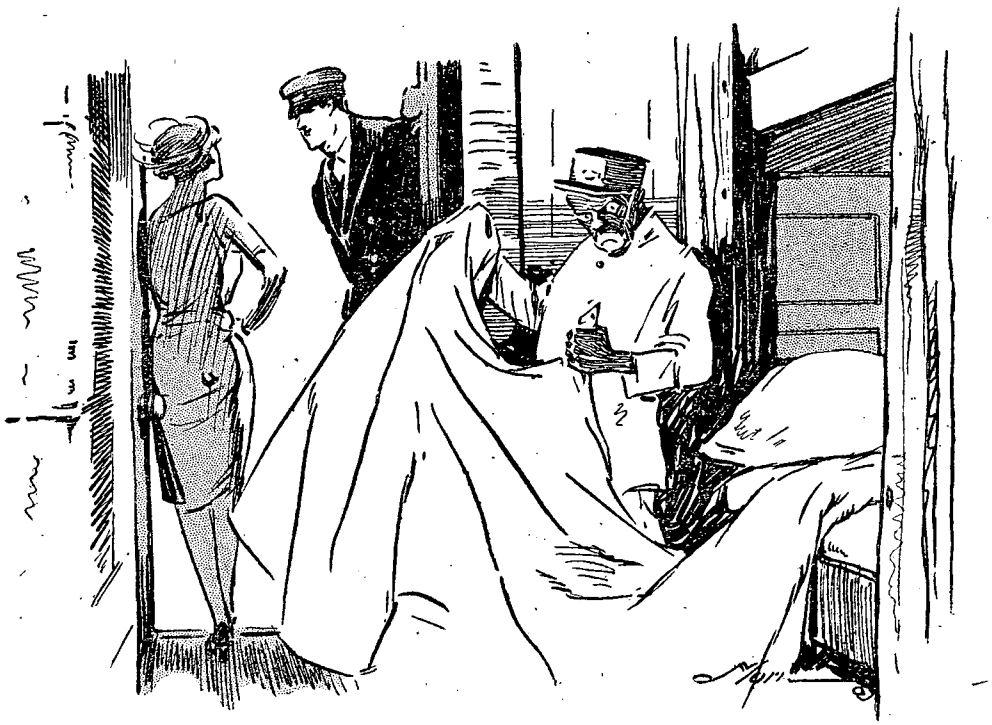

Jeff's Lucky Day

A Pullman adventure in which the rear-end brakeman makes an enemy whose animosity he later on finds of service to him

By LAURANCE M. HARE

"WHITE boy back dere think he own de railroad. Think he de brassiest brass hat on de line. Boy, he think dem thoughts so fas' he's gonna bus' right out'n dat noo uneeform less'n he watch out. An' if'n he don't, I'll bus' him mahself."

"Aw jes' sqush him 'twixt yo' fingehs, Jeff, an' heave him out'n de back do'h," counseled Jeff's fellow porter.

"Humph!" Jeff was disdainful and screwed his wizened little face into an expression of contempt. "I'm gonna stawmp him right undeh foot so he be jes' paht de flo'h. Won't be even one dem shiny silveh buttons lef' when I gits th'ough."

The "white boy" whose complete extermination Jeff had just outlined was one Bert Loomis, officially designated at the yard office as a spare passenger brakeman. The title was newly acquired, and this was his first trip in that capacity.

It is true that during his seven years at Luthersfield, in the foothills of the Alleghanies in Pennsylvania, he had occasionally grabbed a passenger run, but they had been few and far between, and only when a regular passenger man or a spare passenger man had been unavailable.

But now Bert's position was inviolable. By right of seniority, he had been officially designated and was of-

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ficially recognized as a spare passenger brakeman. He had purchased a brand new uniform to celebrate the occasion and, as the saying goes, he was "feeling his oats" when his first run turned out to be on No. 2 going East, an all-Pullman limited, the finest train on the railroad.

Jefferson Johnson, also by right of seniority in the ranks of Pullman porters, was on the same train when it pulled out of Luthersfield about daylight that morning.

His position was even more inviolable than Bert's. This was his regular run. There was nothing spare about him, except his anatomy. While Bert got on the train at Luthersfield and would get off again at the end of the division high up in the mountains long before the train reached New York, Jeff had been on it ever since it left Chicago the previous evening.

Accordingly, Jefferson Johnson had a great and acute disdain for all railroad men. He swayed back through his car, the last on the train, where sleepy-eyed passengers were here and there emerging from behind the green curtains that lined the aisle.

At the rear he stopped before the partly opened door of an empty compartment.

He pushed the door open.

Inside, sitting on the back of his neck, with his feet cocked up on the seat before him and his nice new uniform cap turned bottom up on the seat beside him, was the new brakeman.

Jeff said nothing, but the sneer on his wrinkled old face was unmistakable if Bert had seen it. But Bert hadn't. When Jeff opened the door, Bert had glanced at him and had returned his gaze to the scenery shooting past the window without giving the porter a second thought.

Jeff didn't like this. He traversed the narrow corridor alongside the row of compartments and the smoking room and opened a small cupboard at the very end of the car beside the vestibule door.

From the cupboard he took a collapsible chair, without any back, the seat of which was a piece of green carpet stretched across the iron framework. He set the chair directly in front of the vestibule door and returned to the compartment.

He caught Bert's eye, and with a slight jerk of his head motioned the brakeman to follow him. Bert put his cap on his head and did so. When they reached the vestibule, the porter turned a wrathful face upon him.

"Whar at you-all git dis idea 'bout confisticatin' dem empty compahtments to pahk yo' carcass in, white folks? Dem's reserve' fo' cus'mers—cash cus'mers ob de Pullman Comp'ny. Wipin' yo' dogs on dem plush cushions like dey was do'h mats! Dis whar you b'longs—settin' right heah watchin' fo' de trains to wave yo' lily white hands at. An', boy, you sets, else I sets you."

Bert sat. He wriggled his chair comfortably into a corner and stretched his legs out into the aisle. He pushed his cap to the back of his head and grinned up at Jeff.

"Thanks, George," said Bert. "I haven't a nickel or I'd give it to you. The smallest I have is a quarter. I was just wondering if I'd have to stand up here until No. 7 goes by. There's just one thing more you can do for me, George. You can move this chair out on the platform. It's a nice warm day, and I'd like some fresh air after all this popping off."

"Pop you right off de railroad," warned Jeff. "If'n I sets dat chair outside, I sets it clean out longside de roadbed an' I sets you out too."

"You and who else?" Bert wanted to know. "You better go back and start portering before some of your passengers get carried on to the next station. We're due in Ashley in about five minutes and passenger trains generally stop there. I thought I'd tell you in case you didn't know."

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Jeff turned on his heel and retreated in disgust. "Humph!" he exclaimed. "Boy don't even know when he insulted."

Bert opened the vestibule door and sat serenely in the doorway listening to the clackety-clack, clackety-clack of the rail joints and dreaming dreams.

There may have been a slight exaggeration in Jeff's first statement that Bert thought he owned the railroad. He didn't think so now, but such a condition was not beyond the scope of his imagination. In fact, he had a pretty definite idea that such, in the course of time, might be the case.

These happy thoughts were intruded upon presently by the lusty ringing of a bell in the corridor which a thoughtful car designer had supplied for the purpose of summoning porters and which porters seem to have a genius for not hearing. So far as Bert could discover, the summons had no effect.

Again the clackety-clack of the rail joints was the only sound until the bell rang again, louder and more insistent. Bert peeked around the corner of the smoking room. There wasn't a sign of the porter.

Now Bert realized quite as fully as had Jeff that he had been insulted. But in choosing not to recognize the insult, he had robbed the old porter of most of his fun.

But even that didn't satisfy Bert, and he listened anxiously for the next peal of the bell. It would please him immensely, he reflected, to have some irate passenger write a complaint against Jefferson Johnson to the Pullman Company.

But the next summons was not the bell at all. It was a woman's voice. It was rather high and undoubtedly feminine.

Even when its owner was provoked, it still remained somewhat melodious. But it was also imperative.

Oh, yes. It was the kind of voice that would make any one sit up and take notice. Bert sat up. Not only that, but he rose to his feet and again peeked around the corner of the smoking room.

The long train was drifting into Ashley, giving a slight lurch every now and then as the air brakes were applied. A girl stood in the door of compartment B, looking impatiently up and down the narrow corridor.

The train lurched more violently, and she was thrown against the opposite side of the passage. She saved herself from falling only when she grabbed the iron hand rail across one of the windows.

It was just about two good leaps for Bert from where he stood to the girl's side. By the time she regained her balance, she found her arm in the grip of a strong masculine hand. She and Bert realized at about the same time that such support was no longer necessary, for the brakeman released her arm hastily and snatched off his hat just as she drew away. Bert looked down at her and grinned.

Bert was proud of his grin, and it accounted in part for his conceit—that and the fact that he was quite a handsome male. He was only twenty-five, and looked even younger.

The seriousness of life had never set very heavily upon him, and his manner was candid, eager and energetic. Certainly it was unusual for such a youthful looking individual to be part of the crew on a limited, all-Pullman passenger train.

The girl smiled faintly and thanked him.

It is hardly necessary to mention that she was pretty—they all are these days. It takes a fairly ugly face to hold out against the effects of modern make-up, and this particular girl had had considerable to start with before the make-up had been applied.

"Did you want something?" Bert inquired.

"I've been ringing for the porter for nearly five minutes," she answered. "Are you the porter?"

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"No, ma'am," said Bert promptly. "I'm a brakeman."

The girl looked at him curiously. "You look more like a newsboy to me—news butchers, I guess you call them. I didn't suppose they allowed minors to work on railroads."

"I ain't—I'm not a minor. I'm twenty-five years old, and I've worked on this railroad for seven years."

"It doesn't matter," the girl interrupted hastily. "Do you know where the porter is?"

"Well," said Bert, "he may have some passengers getting off at this station, though I doubt it. Chances are, he's figuring out the best way to commit an assault on a certain brakeman."

In spite of herself, the girl laughed. Immediately she blushed and straightened up and said in a decidedly icy manner:

"I don't know why I'm standing here talking with you. I only wanted to tell the porter to make up my berth while I'm at breakfast.

"Which way is the diner? Will I have time for breakfast before I reach my station?"

"The diner's up forward," said Bert. "Which station is your station?"

"Summit."

"That's where I get off too—end of the division," Bert explained. "You've got lots of time for breakfast. About three hours."

The girl wanted to laugh again, but she didn't. Instead, she remarked quite severely, though there was a faint twinkle in her brown eyes:

"Goodness! I don't know why railroad men have to be so personal. I didn't ask where you get off nor about your personal grievance with the porter. I don't know why you think I'd be interested, but," she added demurely, "I am. You look like a nice boy and I can't understand why any one would want to assault you. You *are* a nice boy, aren't you?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Bert promptly.

The train had stopped. Bert looked about quickly, as if he had just awakened from a dream, a pleasant dream, and started for the back door.

"Wait a minute," he said over his shoulder to the girl. "I'll be back."

"I shan't," she replied. "I'm going to breakfast."

Bert couldn't stop, at the moment, to argue the question. Standing at the rear end of the train when in a station, with a red flag in his hand with which to give the high-ball, was one of his few duties, and here he was falling down on the job.

"Gosh," said Bert as he stood waiting for the baggage to be unloaded up ahead, "good thing I didn't make them wait for me. Bad enough to insult a strange lady and probably get reported for my pains. Wonder what ails me?"

And then, out of a clear sky, as the image of the girl remained in his mind, it occurred to him what ailed him.

"Must be I'm in love," he told himself. "Gosh!" and he grinned happily.

But his grin didn't last long. He had just given the high-ball, climbed up into the vestibule, and closed the door when his face fell.

"Lot of good it'll do me to be in love with her. Tell her to wait for me and she as much as said to go to grass. Serves me right. Can't ever keep my tongue in my head. Hell!"

He sat down on his little chair and gazed pensively upon the fleeing scenery and listened to the clackety-clack, clackety-clack as the wheels passed over the rail joints, and mooned.

"Maybe," he argued, "she was just being playful when she said that. Aw, gosh! I better kick myself for an idiot. She just wanted to talk to somebody to pass the time. Catch a girl with a whole compartment to herself wanting anything to do with a brakeman. She's probably got a dad that could buy the railroad if he

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wanted it. Gosh, I hope I didn't make her mad anyway."

At that moment, Jeff stuck his head around the corner.

Bert looked at him and remembered what the girl had said about making up her berth.

"George!" he called nonchalantly. "The young lady in compartment B wants her berth made up while she's at breakfast. Give you something to do besides watch me."

Jeff glowered at him. "Gives you sumpin to do pickin' up what pieces of you is lef' afteh I gits th'ough. I works fo' de Pullman Comp'ny, boy, an' I don't take no ordehs from no lil back end brakeman. Quickeh you larns dat, betteh off you is."

"Suit yourself," said Bert, "but you better make up that berth or you'll have that young lady on your neck. And, believe me, she's just the kind that could make you dance."

"Chase yo'self, white boy," Jeff advised, "'fore I chases you," and he retreated to the other end of the car. He did not make up the berth in compartment B.

II.

FORTY-FIVE minutes were ticked off to the monotonous clack of the vanishing rail joints. Then there came a sudden, savage, uninterrupted, continuous, angry ringing of the bell in the corridor.

Bert squirmed uncomfortably in his seat as it persisted. It made him feel as though he himself was guilty of a misdemeanor, instead of the refractory porter.

The bell ceased ringing abruptly and there was a slight commotion, together with the sound of voices, in the vicinity of compartment B.

"Porter!" The voice was the melodious, imperative one of the girl. Bert listened intently. At that moment he wanted nothing more in life than to listen to the music of that voice and obey its despotic owner.

"Why," it continued, "didn't you make up my berth while I was gone?"

"Didn't know you was gone," Jeff explained humbly.

"But I told the brakeman to tell you. I rang and rang for you before I went to breakfast. Didn't he tell you?"

"Don't know nothin' 'bout no brakeman, miss. Fixes yo' be'th right off, miss. Takes me jes' one lil jiffy."

"Where am I going to stay while you do it? I wanted it done while I was at breakfast. I don't believe the brakeman didn't tell you. I asked him to especially."

"Don't know nothin' 'bout dat, miss. Didn't know you was gone. Fixes yo' be'th right off. Sets anywhar you like, miss. De whole cah's yo's."

"Goodness!" the girl continued impatiently. "I never saw such indifference. I've a good notion to report you. Where is the brakeman?"

"Cain't say, miss. Don't know nothin' 'bout no brakeman," Jeff repeated.

The girl walked past him with an impatient twist of her shoulders and started for the rear of the car. When she came in sight of Bert on his little stool, she stopped short.

Bert jumped to his feet and took off his cap.

"Oh!" she said, surprised. "I didn't know you were here." She glanced through the vestibule doorway. "Goodness! Isn't there even an observation platform on this train?"

Bert shrugged his shoulders. "You can have this stool if you like. I'll set it out on the platform for you. I'll open one of the doors so you can see better."

The girl agreed and Bert set the stool outside and opened one of the doors. This was against the rules and he had to stand between the girl and the door to make sure she wouldn't venture too near the edge and fall off.

He was considerably elated to be able to function officially in the girl's presence. But she immediately threw cold water on his elation.

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"Didn't you tell that porter what I asked you to?" she inquired suspiciously.

"Yes, ma'am," answered Bert, "but he never pays any attention to anything I say. He thought I was trying to kid him, I guess."

"I don't see," she remarked, "why he has to take his personal grievances out on the passengers. For a cent, I'd report him."

Bert reached into his trousers pocket, solemnly drew forth a bright new penny and handed it to her. She smiled at him frankly.

"You have my permission," he said. "I don't think it would do you any good, though."

"Oh, that reminds me," the girl commented. "You were going to tell me what the trouble is between you two."

Bert wrinkled his nose negligently, and turned his head farther in her direction.

"I'm new on passenger," he explained, "and this is the first time I've had this run. That porter is what you might call a veteran and he just doesn't like the way I wear my face or something."

"I think that's mean," said the girl earnestly. And if Bert had tried with all his might to excite her sympathies, he couldn't have done a better job. Only he didn't know it.

"I guess," he said, "that you haven't done very much traveling."

The girl glanced at him quickly.

"How do you know I didn't travel much?" she inquired.

Bert shrugged his shoulders.

"What you said about reporting the porter and thinking it mean of him to ride my neck like he has. I appreciate your agreeing with me," he assured her hastily, "but nobody pays any attention to porters. Wouldn't do any good if they did. Experienced travelers never pay any attention to them."

The girl gazed thoughtfully out upon the landscape and busied herself keeping her skirt in place against the wind from the open door.

"Well," she said, "fath—that is, we haven't always been able to do everything we liked. It's only comparatively recently that we've been able to indulge our fancies to any extent. Goodness!"

Her attitude of friendly conversation vanished abruptly and she spoke severely.

"Here I am reciting my whole family history to a man whom I've never seen before. What must you think of me? Do see if the porter is finished in my room, will you, please, Mr. ——?"

"Bert's my name," said the brakeman eagerly, even as he saw the look of self-reproach and confusion in the girl's eyes. "Bert Loomis. I'll have to shut this door while I'm gone. Be back in a second."

A man's mind works rapidly on some occasions and while he was walking the half dozen or so steps from the vestibule to the door of the compartment, Bert did a lot of thinking.

The burden of his thoughts was to keep the girl on the platform as long as he could. His first idea was to bluff the porter into taking as long as possible to make up the berth by telling him of the girl's threat to report him for his negligence and perhaps, if necessary, to bribe him. But a more dignified and practicable plan immediately superseded that.

As he entered the compartment, Jeff was leisurely making up the berth.

"Say, George," Bert said nonchalantly, "don't be all day in here. The passenger paid for this compartment and she doesn't want to ride out there in the vestibule the rest of the trip."

Jeff was mad.

"Chase yo'self, lil feller," he said. "I lets de passenger know when I gits th'ough. Don't need no help frum you neither. Won't git no tip frum her now afteh you buttin' in mah business."

"Don't go blaming it onto me," Bert replied. "I told you to make up the berth. It's your own fault that you

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didn't. You just get a move on before she gets real mad and reports you."

"Does some reportin' mahself, less'n you gits," Jeff threatened. "All time pesterin' a man."

"Well," said Bert, "you'll have somebody else pestering you if you don't get this work done."

And then he laughed. Already the porter's movements were perceptibly slower, if possible, and Bert knew that he would drag out the operation of making the berth as long as he possibly could, which suited the brakeman perfectly.

As he turned to go, Bert noticed an expensive but worn leather bag on the floor. It was lettered with three gold initials. They were just ordinary initials, but Bert caught his breath and stared at them fixedly for a moment before he went on.

III.

"HAS the porter finished yet?" asked the girl when he returned.

"Not yet," said Bert, trying to hide his sense of triumph. "Gee!" he continued, "I just got an awful surprise. I looked at the initials on your bag and they're the same as the general passenger agent of the railroad—Mr. Jemson. Everybody calls him J. M. J.—same as the initials on your bag. Quite a coincidence," he remarked casually.

The girl glanced at him, but he was staring through the doorway. Her eyes twinkled and she said:

"Well, you see, it's father's bag."

Bert turned toward her as though he had been shot.

"You—you mean," he stammered, "that J. M. J. is your father?"

Miss Jemson nodded her head mischievously.

"Gosh!" said Bert fervently, "I hope I haven't done anything you didn't like."

"What do you mean?" she inquired.

"Oh, that porter business and my trying to get familiar with you this way."

"You aren't to blame for what the porter does or doesn't do," she assured him, "and as for getting acquainted with me—I guess I'm as much responsible for that as you. If I hadn't wanted you to I wouldn't have let you."

"Then you do like me some?" Bert asked anxiously.

Again Miss Jemson nodded her head. Bert took a deep breath.

"Gosh," he said, "I wish I was good enough to ask you to let me see you again."

Miss Jemson looked at him in surprise. "Aren't you?" she asked. "You told me awhile ago that you were a nice boy."

"Oh, I don't mean that," Bert explained. "I mean I'm just a brakeman and I haven't got much education."

"You know father used to be a brakeman," said the girl.

"I know," said Bert. "I've always admired your father a great deal, Miss Jemson, from the stories I've heard about him. I've worked awful hard, hoping that some day I'd land a good job, too. But I don't know, it's a pretty long grind. I suppose you're going to school at Summit," he ventured.

"Yes, but not as a student," Miss Jemson explained. "I'm teaching."

"I don't see why you have to teach when your father's general passenger agent of the road."

"I don't have to," she explained. "Before father was promoted I always wanted to be a teacher, so I thought I'd try it anyway. Besides, I like to earn my own money. Listen, Bert," she said suddenly, "would you like to go to school?"

"Sure, I'd like to," said Bert, "but I can't."

"Yes, you can. I'll tell you what I'll do. You make a trip up to Summit every two or three days, don't you?"

"Generally," Bert agreed.

"Well, I'll be your teacher. I'll assign your lessons and you can study

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them while you're gone and then I'll hear you recite whenever you're at this end of the division."

"Do you really mean that?" Bert asked.

"Sure I do."

"Gosh," said the brakeman.

They were holding hands in rapt silence a few minutes later when the porter came and announced that compartment B was in order. He stood aside to let the girl pass and she did so without a look or a word to Bert.

When she was gone, the porter faced Bert with a furrow in his forehead.

"Listen, boss man," he began. "I been doin' some thinkin'. Is dat lady gonna report me? 'Cause I don't want her to. I's got a good job heah an' I hate like hell to lose it. I done thought you was kiddin' me when you tol' me to make up dat be'th."

"Forget it, Jeff," said Bert magnanimously. He put his hand in his pocket and drew forth a one-dollar bill. Jeff accepted it with glowing eyes.

"Thank—ee, suh!" he said emphatically. "Thankee. Boss man, I wants to 'pologize fo' bein' so crusty wid you."

"All right," said Bert impatiently. "Now you beat it. I'm in love and I want to be left alone. And you be good to that girl when she gets off the train."

"Yassuh," Jeff assured him as he departed.

Some time later when No. 2 was stopped under the train shed at Summit, Jefferson Johnson stood on the platform beside his car and grinned after the retreating figure of a brakeman carrying a hat box and traveling bag and escorting a young lady stationward.

As he looked and grinned, Jeff carefully wrapped the one-dollar bill that Bert had given him around a five which the girl had handed him just before the train stopped.

"Lawd gosh," said Jeff as he pocketed the money, "ain't love grand?"

THE END

Dead Man's Island Goes

BEFORE long Dead Man's Island, so rich in fragmentary history dating back to Spanish explorations along the Pacific Coast, will be no more. Located at the entrance to San Pedro—Los Angeles—harbor, the island is now being blasted away because it is a menace to harbor shipping.

The island was originally known as "Isla de los Muertos" among the Spaniards. Its present name is said to date from the burial of a sailor on the island, the sailor having died on a trading vessel that put in to the port. It is also credited with being the resting place for the remains of an English commander of a small merchant ship.

During Commodore Stockton's expedition against the Spaniards at Pueblo de los Angeles in 1846, one detachment engaged with a Spanish force and had to retreat. The American detachment fell back to San Pedro, taking with it the dead and wounded. Isla de los Muertos was the burial place for five of the expedition.

That the island deserved its name on several separate counts is indicated by another story that early Spaniards found the body of a dead seaman on the island. This seaman was supposed to have been a smuggler or pirate.

Besides those already mentioned two passengers off a Panama ship and a woman were also buried on the island, making ten in all.

Harold J. Ashe.

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The Screen of Ice

Gillian Hazeltine prosecutes outside the law to prove to lovers the adage: "What a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive."

By GEORGE F. WORTS

CHAPTER IX *(Continued).*

FANTASIA.

GILLIAN HAZELTINE had once seen a motion picture called "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligeri," in which all architecture and furniture were lop-sided, topsy-turvy, and cubistic. This medical amphitheater reminded him of that picture.

The lines of the room ran at all sorts of crazy angles. The seats themselves were unnatural. They weren't seats; merely benches of stone or concrete, one above the other, running upward in a semicircle from the pit. Fat brass rails gleamed. They were for visiting doctors and students to lean on.

He shuddered.

"I suppose I can't smoke," he said to the watchful orderly who sat beside him, indifferently looking down.

"No, sir."

Minutes passed. The pretty scrub nurse, he had noticed, went briskly and efficiently about her business. Gillian resented her briskness. Oh, well, to these people a human life, a personality athrob with being, was nothing but "a case." He supposed they had to be hard boiled.

A man in white entered the pit. Gillian had never seen him before. He was blond, bald, pink-skinned, blue-eyed, about forty.

"That's Andover," the orderly whispered in a tone as reverential as one he might have employed in saying,

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for June 16

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"That's John the Baptist." "Next to Lorber, he's the biggest brain man in the State. He's done some great work. He's gonna assist Lorber."

Dr. Andover looked up and nodded pleasantly to Gillian. A slender, beautiful blonde girl followed him. She went to the sterilizer, opened a door, and peeked in with the busy interest of a housewife inspecting a roast.

With a nickeled instrument she forked from the sterilizer a pair of rubber gloves. Dr. Andover finished washing his hands at a basin in a corner and accepted the gloves. Placing them on his hands, he walked to the operating table and stood, crossing his hands at the wrists, as if all this were some solemn religious ceremony.

He had crossed his hands at the wrists, Gillian would learn, as a precautionary measure. Thus engaged, his hands would not be tempted to touch anything. They were sterile. Anything might undo their sterility.

The pretty blond nurse busied herself at the sterilizer. She removed a number of hideous instruments in a tray and placed the tray on a stand near the operating table.

Gillian felt himself growing fainter and fainter, sicker and sicker.

He groaned as the swinging doors, visible from where he sat, opened again.

A cart was being wheeled in. He found himself staring at the back of a man's head—the head of his friend, Billy the Yegg. The man lay on the cart, unconscious. The top of his head had been cleanly shaved.

Orderlies lifted him from the cart to the operating table. Behind the cart came the anæsthetist and, finally, Dr. Lorber, all grave, all somehow giving the impression that this was a pagan ceremony to some unbelievable god.

Dr. Lorber glanced up at Gillian. He smiled briefly. He extended his hands for rubber gloves. With a commanding eye fixed on Gillian, he put on the gloves. His eyes said: "Don't be such a big baby!"

But Gillian could not signal back his reassurance with a smile. He had never fainted in his life. Except when he had been asleep, he had never, to his knowledge, been unconscious.

He was aware now that strange things were happening to him. The walls of the amphitheater had suddenly seemed to become infinitely tall and glossy. A faint, muffled roaring sound was audible, as if in the far distance, an electric dynamo was whirring.

Far, far away, he heard the voice of Dr. Lorber saying, briskly: "All ready, doctor."

The nurse was holding out the tray of instruments.

Dr. Lorber selected something. Was it a saw? A knife? A chisel?

Gillian, faintly groaning, could not quite decide. He did not care. The amphitheater, with the operating table as a hub, was beginning to wheel. Now it was sliding off to the right. The nickeled instruments gave off soft flickers and sparks of light as they joined the room's tilting revolution.

The brass rails for visiting doctors and students to lean on were inclining shafts of glitter.

Gillian was exerting the last ounce of his will power to fight off this dreadful intoxication. The roaring became louder. The walls became glossier. The soft sparkle of the instruments was translated into sharp proddings in the region of his stomach. His stomach began to flutter like an imprisoned bird.

Darkness came pouring into his brain as if decanted from a great pitcher.

Vaguely some one said:

"You can start sawing along this line, doctor. It's unquestionably in this area of the temporal."

A railroad train came swooping out of illimitable space at a mad angle toward Gillian Hazeltine. Its wheels went thundering above his sinking head.

There followed a long interval of reeling confusion, in which lights flashed on and off, deep voices mur-

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mured, people in white flitted here and there; all to be followed by a sensation as of floating through interstellar space.

The fantasy of swimming through starry voids was similar to the one Gillian had enjoyed as a small boy, when, in dreams, he had, without wings, without aid, swum through the air and along school room ceilings.

A voice growled:

"You great big baby—drink this!"

And Gillian Hazeltine found himself propped up in the white chair in the X-ray room with Dr. Lorber bending over him, pinkly perspiring, a drink of whisky in his hand.

CHAPTER X.

THE MORNING AFTER.

GILLIAN swallowed the whisky and licked lips which were devoid of almost all sensation. He felt cold and weak and nerveless and quite ill.

"Is it all over?" he asked in a husky whisper.

"Yes, Gillian."

"How—how did it go?"

"Weren't you watching it?"

"I don't seem to remember."

"That's queer. I looked up at you several times and explained what was taking place. Don't you remember seeing me sawing the hole in his head?"

Gillian groaned.

"No."

"Don't you remember me showing you the square plate of bone I cut from his head with the lump that was causing the pressure on his cerebellum?"

"No."

"Well, that's funny. You seemed to be terribly interested. You were leaning on the rail, and your eyes were like shoe buttons. I thought you were fascinated."

"Fascinated!" Gillian moaned.

"I thought you didn't pass out until it was all over. Just when we were finishing, your arms flopped down and you hung over the rail as limp as a dummy hanging over a balcony. Orderlies carried you down here, you know."

"I don't want to hear anything more about it," Gillian peevishly cut off his old friend's amiable reminiscences. "I suppose I'll never hear the end of this. Well, all I have to say, doggone you, doc, is—just wait till I get some doctor on the witness stand! If you tell around town what happened to me in that amphitheater, I'm going gunning for the medical profession. And you know me when my dander's up!"

"I won't breathe a word of the disgrace of Greenboro's leading legal light to a soul," breathed Dr. Lorber. "But I'm sorry you didn't see the operation. It was one of the cleanest and quickest jobs of my career. Not a hitch and not the slightest complication of any kind."

"Well—well, what did you find, doc?"

"Do you want to see what I found? It's in alcohol, and I'll have an orderly bring it in and show it to you if you say the word. It's one of the prettiest specimens of fibrous—"

"Stop!" wailed Gillian. "I can't stand any more. What is it you call these people who take such a delight in making others suffer?"

"Sadist," grinned Dr. Lorber.

"That's what you are," cried Gillian. "You're nothing but a doggoned sadist! That's what all of you are! You slice, bore, saw, and chisel into people because you love to see them suffer! You know how I hate all this business, and you're laying it on as thick as you can just to make me squirm. Stop being so damned technical and—and sadistic, and tell me how the operation went."

Dr. Lorber continued to grin.

"When we surgeons run into people as chicken-hearted as you are, Gillian, we have to make them suffer. It's good for you. You're a sadist yourself. I've seen you performing in a

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court room. I've seen the expression of fiendish glee on your face when you've got some poor devil squirming on the witness stand. What you've been through to-night is well-earned punishment.

"The operation? As I told you, it went off without a hitch. We found a growth inside the boy's skull as big as the first joint of your thumb. Dr. Andover is putting his head back together now. I left him to clean up because I thonght you'd had a heart attack. You did, Gillian—an attack of chicken-heart!"

"Will—will Billy pull through all right, doc?" Gillian quavered.

"I don't see why not. He has the constitution of a horse. Everything, as I say, went off smoothly. There weren't any hemorrhages; in fact, it was simple, straightaway routine. As far as I can see, there's nothing to worry about.

"The possibility of infection is very slight. You can go home and go to bed—and if you'll take my professional advice you'll do it now. You look as if you'd been on a three weeks' bat. Your eyes look like burned holes in a blanket and you're the color of putty. Get out of here!"

"When will he be able to get up?"

"In a couple of weeks, if there are not complications."

"When can I see him?"

"To-morrow, if he's feeling as well as I'm expecting him to feel," said the doctor.

"You're absolutely sure, are you, doc, that there won't be any trouble?"

"I didn't say that. I said the operation was successful; that he has the constitution of a horse; that he ought to be up in about two weeks; and that, if complications don't arise, you can drop in on him to-morrow. Get out of here, you pest!"

Gillian staggered forth from St. Mary's Hospital and entered his coupé. He was as weak, he told himself, as a half drowned cat. For years he had lived in dread of an operation. To-night, he was sure, he had suffered more than he would suffer when the day came for him to be wheeled into that chamber of horrors and have things carved out of him.

He wished Dr. Lorber had been more emphatic in his assurances of Billy's chances for recovery. Depressing words of Dr. Lorber's ran through his mind as he lighted a cigar:

"I can't guarantee anything, Gillian. You can't open up human beings as you open up an automobile engine."

Gillian became conscious that the excellent cigar he was smoking smelled exactly like burning garbage. He discarded it.

Steering an uncertain course, he drove to his mansion in Riverdale.

Ordinarily the heaviest of sleepers, he did not doze until dawn was at his bedroom windows. He was awake at seven thirty; and his first act on waking was to telephone the hospital. He was informed that Mr. Vollmer had come out of the ether some hours ago and was resting "as comfortably as could be expected."

"You mean, there's still some danger?" he asked of the floor nurse with whom he had been connected.

"Mr. Vollmer is suffering considerable pain," the nurse answered. "But that is to be expected after a trephining."

"Is there anything to worry about?"

"It is too early yet to say," said the floor nurse, and hung up her receiver.

On that discomforting note Gillian arose, dressed, and tried to eat his breakfast. His breakfast generally consisted of the juice of three oranges, two generous helpings of oatmeal, a platter of toast, four or five eggs, bacon, and two or three cups of coffee. This morning he toyed with a piece of toast—and called it a meal.

Generally Gillian entered his office at nine thirty. This morning he was

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there before anybody else. He called up St. Mary's until the switchboard operator at the hospital, her patience frayed away, said sharply:

"Listen, mister, your friend is perfickly O K. Honest, I'm not lying to you. He ate a hearty breakfast and he's feeling fine. Why should I keep anything from you?"

"When can I see him?" Gillian gasped.

"I'll ask the floor nurse."

She reported to him presently that he could visit the patient, unless unforeseen complications arose in the meantime, at half past eleven.

When Miss Lawrence came into his office, Gillian fairly snarled at her.

"I am not in to any one. I don't want to be disturbed. I want to be left alone."

His excellent private secretary said nothing vocally, but her expressive eyes snapped, as if to a challenge.

When she left Gillian shut the door and began to pace up and down in his office, smoking cigars until the air was blue. Each time he went to a window, to relieve his mental distress by gazing at distances, he was frustrated by the screen of ice. He presently opened his pocketknife and scraped away an area large enough to see through.

He looked down upon Chestnut Street, and he suddenly stopped breathing. Far below him a man was doing something to Firbank's windows. The distance was too great for Gillian to make out quite what the man was doing.

The telephone rang while he was staring down. He hastened to the instrument, and the excited voice of Anita Ravanno came to his ear.

"Mr. Hazeltine? Did you get it?"

"We did," Gillian assured her.

"I'll be down immediately."

"If I'm not in when you come you will find it on my desk. Wait here until I return."

He hung up the receiver and mopped great beads of perspiration from his forehead. Never, he vowed, would he gratuitously interfere with the course of people's lives again. If some of these mysterious complications which Dr. Lorber had spoken about should arise, what would happen to him?

If Billy Vollmer died! If Billy emerged from the hospital with something wrong with his brain! Such things happened. He had heard of them happening. Supposing Billy, with the growth removed from his head, suffered a complete loss of memory? What a damned fool he had been to take all this responsibility!

The ringing of the telephone bell broke in upon his tortured thoughts. It was probably some one at the hospital calling to tell him that his worst fears had been realized; that Billy had suffered a relapse; that hope was despaired of.

He said hello in the faint gasping tone of a drowning man going down for the third time.

A man's harsh voice said: "This is Jason Firbank."

Gillian was so relieved that he laughed. Jovially he said:

"Why, hello, there, Jason! I was just thinking about you."

"You'd better do some damned *fast* thinking about me," said the indignant voice at the other end.

"What seems to be the matter?" Gillian asked. "You ought to know that thinking fast is the best thing I do."

"You took that parcel out of my safe last night!" raged Greenboro's leading jeweler.

"You don't tell me!" breathed the Silver Fox.

"You were seen entering my store. You were seen taking it. I'm going to get out a warrant for your arrest on a charge of forcible entry and grand larceny."

"In other words," Gillian merrily took him up, "you're laying a trap to make yourself the biggest joke in Greenboro."

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"You did take that package!" cried the jeweler.

"Try and prove it!" Gillian laughed.

"This is just one more score I've got against you," said the furious jeweler. "One of these days—"

"The line forms on the right," Gillian gayly interrupted him. "The people who are going to get even with me form a line miles long. Fall in line, Jason. And the next time you try your dirty work on friends of mine, just remember that I have eyes like gimlets and ears like radio amplifiers. Go out and roll around in the snow awhile, Jason, and you'll cool off. Good-by."

For the fiftieth time Gillian glanced at his wrist watch; the time was eleven ten. At eleven twenty-two he was entering the hospital. At eleven twenty-four he was, on unsteady legs, making his way into room 1220—the most expensive room in the hospital, with a southern exposure, a view of the ice-bound Sangamo River, and a private bathroom.

A pretty blue-eyed, golden-haired nurse met him in the doorway.

"How is Mr. Vollmer?" Gillian croaked.

"He is doing very nicely. Are you the gentleman who has been phoning all morning?"

"I am."

She gave him a bright smile.

"You may see him now."

CHAPTER XI.

FRUITS OF DECEPTION.

GILLIAN went teetering in with his hands gripped at his sides. The pale January sunlight, shining through the south window, fell upon a young man propped up on pillows; a young man whose head was swathed in white bandages.

The blue eyes of the young man were open. They were gazing speculatively at the famous criminal lawyer.

"Billy?" Gillian said tentatively.

"Well?" said the patient.

"Do—do you recognize me?"

"There isn't anything wrong with my eyesight," the young man answered.

"I mean, you know me, don't you? I—I'm your old friend, Gillian Hazeltine."

"I know you're Gillian Hazeltine," said the victim of Gillian's loving thoughtfulness. "But I'm not so sure you're my friend. Sit down. Pull up a chair."

Gillian pulled up a chair beside the bed and sat down.

"That stunt you pulled off last night," said Billy the Yegg, not removing his penetrating blue eyes from the lawyer's, "was one of the meanest tricks ever played on a civilized human being."

"I did it for your own good," Gillian meekly responded.

"Hiring that pork-and-beaner to knock me out, so you could drag me in here to have my skull carved into! All I wish is that you were wearing my head this morning."

"Does it hurt, Billy?"

"Does it hurt!" the young man growled. "Do you suppose you can use a chisel and a saw on a man's head—" He stopped and grinned. "I don't mean a word of it, Mr. Hazeltine. I'll be grateful to you to the end of my life. What really hurts isn't my head, but that I've got to admit I've been wrong."

Gillian relieved himself of a gushing sigh.

"We won't talk about that."

"We will talk about that," Billy contradicted. "Since I came out of the ether, at about four thirty this morning, I've been overworking my brain, doping things out.

"I've been trying to understand why I've always objected so strenuously to letting you take me to a doctor and having my head X-rayed. I think my stubbornness must have been tied up with the same bunch of influences that caused me to turn crooked."

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"You remember all that, Billy?"

"I remember everything. The only thing I can't remember is why I stole; why I wanted to crack safes. Whatever it was, is gone. You see that pickle jar over there with the little gray lump in the bottom of it? That's the lump they took out."

"How about that feeling of pressure?"

"It's gone—all gone."

"How do you feel otherwise, Billy?"

"Mr. Hazeltine, you could buy me on the hoof for thirty cents!"

"But you're reasonably certain you won't ever have the hankering to open other people's safes?"

"I am!"

"Thank God!" Gillian ejaculated. The burden of the past eight or nine hours slipped from him. And he breathed a sigh of immeasureable relief. Billy the Yegg would recover! Billy the Yegg had been restored at last to the ranks of respectability!

He was whistling when he returned to his office. He had accomplished what he had quixotically set out to accomplish—and no one's fingers had been burned!

Anita Ravanno was sitting beside his desk, with the oilskin parcel in her lap, unopened, when he entered his private office. She had evidently slept but little. She was very pale, and her eyes were dark and large and tragic.

He greeted her cheerily and added:

"Anita, I've just been through a dreadful experience. I'm going to tell you all about it on the way down to the hospital—because I want you to go down there with me and thank the young man who got these records for you. He won't take a penny in payment. Will you go?"

"Of course I will!"

In his coupé, on the short drive to the hospital, he told her briefly the story of Billy the Yegg.

"I was taking an awful chance," he said in conclusion. "But it was really worth it."

"I've never met a real safe cracker," Anita said. "I don't know whether to be scared or thrilled."

They had reached the porte-cochère of St. Mary's Hospital. Gillian parked the car and they went in.

As they left the elevator on the twelfth floor, Gillian said:

"I don't think we had better stay very long. I only want to speed him along the road to recovery."

Gillian opened the door of Room 1220. He followed her in. He heard her say in a thin, incredulous voice:

"Oliver! Oliver!"

Then she was on her knees beside the man in the bed.

Gillian, who had closed the door behind him, now gripped the knob and muttered, "Oliver? Oliver?" almost as if mocking her, but with the rising inflection of astonishment.

Anita, looking up at him with incredulity giving way to anger, exclaimed breathlessly:

"He's been in an accident! Oh, Oliver, what happened?"

Gillian rebounded from the first startling blow of astonishment.

He repeated, sharply: "Oliver? Oliver who?"

Anita sprang up, sensing for the first time that this was not some elaborate dramatic game.

"You know he is Oliver, Mr. Hazeltine!"

"Oliver—Oliver Clave?" Gillian demanded. "The man you're engaged to? The man you told me about yesterday? Are you telling me that this man is—is Oliver Clave?"

"Of course it's Oliver!"

Gillian sagged against the door, still hanging to the knob, and stared at the man in the bed. He could not reconcile his own knowledge with her assertions. He gasped:

"I don't believe it. You're mixed up, Anita. This man's name is Billy Vollmer. I've known him for five years as Billy Vollmer, or Billy the Yegg."

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Anita sat down with a gasp in the bedside chair. Every trace of color had deserted her face.

"I—I don't believe you," she said in a small, husky voice. "You—you're playing some joke. This man is not a—a crook. He never has been a crook. Oliver, what's it all about?"

The man in bed had closed his eyes. Now he opened them. He licked his lips. He swallowed. Finally, he groaned. His voice when it came in the form of words was not louder than a whisper.

"My name is Oliver Clave," he said. "Mr. Hazeltine has known me for—for a number of years under another name. I went to him in the first place because I thought he might help me. He did—finally. I mean, last night he had me knocked unconscious and operated on. That's all the explanation there is."

His voice stopped. The girl in the chair and the man at the door looked at him in silence, waiting. Oliver Wharton Clave, alias Billy the Yegg, fumbled with his fingers.

"I couldn't help it because I was crooked, Anita. I know I've lost you. I—I wanted to tell you—" His voice choked.

"Look here, Oliver—or Billy—or whoever the devil you are," Gillian broke in. "Why didn't you come clean with me in the first place?"

"I thought I'd lick it myself," was the young man's answer.

"You would have married this girl, letting her know—"

"I would not have married her! I would have told her. If you hadn't brought her here now, I would have sent for her as soon as I was strong enough to think."

With trembling hands and in violation of hospital rules, Gillian prepared a cigar and lighted it. In moments of stress, he simply had to smoke. When the cigar was going he said:

"This is one of the most complicated messes that's ever come my way. I don't see how it can be straightened out. If it's humanly possible, I want to help you two young idiots. But what can be done? You admired this fellow, Anita, because of his—his wonderful ideals.

"Now you find that he has been living by blowing safes. You, Billy, or Oliver, admired this girl because of her nobility and partly because of her marvelous ancestry. You're going to find out that she's been deceiving you, too; lying to you and, what's more, giving you the opportunity to blow your last safe. This is Miss X, Oliver."

Oliver Clave opened his eyes again. He stared at Anita, but he said nothing.

"I have apparently gone to a great deal of pains," Gillian resumed, "to illustrate to the two of you the tragic consequences of deception. I didn't intend to teach a moral lesson when I engineered this deal.

"I agreed to secure a man to break into a safe to insure your peace of mind, Anita—and against my very best judgment. And I salved my conscience by insuring, with the aid of a pugilist and a surgeon, that it would be his last crooked act.

"But now where are we? Each of you finds that your idol has feet of clay. You have deliberately and calculatingly deceived each other. Where is the idealist each of you adored?

"Half of the crimes in America are passional crimes, or crimes of passion, and at least half of these begin with deception. I wonder how far you two would have carried this deception if fate hadn't stepped in and blown you sky high!

"Knowing human nature, I am convinced that you would have attempted to deceive each other to the grave. Supposing you had married. Supposing a year or two later, each of you had found out the truth about the other?

"You thought he was a man of the highest principles, didn't you, Anita? He let you think that. He fooled you

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perfectly. If you had dreamed that he was—a yegg!"

"And she led you to believe, didn't she, Oliver, that her ancestry was without a blot, that the purest of pure Castilian blood ran in her veins? She fooled *you* perfectly."

Anita said nothing, nor did Oliver.

"Knowing what your feelings were on the subject of heredity, she believed she had to deceive you. She let you go on thinking her ancestry was without a blemish. Well, so it is—if you'll drop this ridiculous superstition about heredity!"

Gillian sadly shook his head.

"What a pretty mess you two have made of your lives! It's too late now for explanations. But you've at least learned a valuable lesson."

He looked gravely from one guilty young face to the other.

"It's this: Don't lie to the one you love. Don't practice deception on the one you love. Your first duty to any one you love is to play square. When you meet the girl, the next girl, Oliver, you'll profit by your wisdom. And when you, Anita, meet the man who will some day be your husband, you, too, will profit by your wisdom. It is, as I say, too late for explanations. You've lost each other!"

Again, more sadly, Gillian shook his head. And he looked again from one tragic young face to the other.

It was Oliver who smashed through his pride to say, in a choking voice:

"I don't care a damn if every one of her ancestors back to Adam and Eve were thieves! I love her! I'll never love any one else!"

Gillian reached for the doorknob. He heard a low sob. Then the daughter of a long line of pure Castilian Ravannos was on her knees at the bedside, and the son of an equally long but unknown ancestry of Claves was holding her fiercely in his arms.

The famous criminal lawyer waited only long enough to hear a broken:

"I love you!"

—Followed by a sobbed, "I adore you!"

He left them, wearing, as he strode to the elevator, the same expression employed by the fabulous cat that swallowed a canary.

Gillian glanced at the windows in his luxurious private office as he entered it. They were clear again. The sun had melted the screen of ice away.

He rang for an office boy, and when the boy appeared, Gillian picked up from his desk a cylinder of yellow oilskin, about ten inches in length and six inches in diameter, bound with a dark-red ribbon.

"Take this parcel across the street to Firbank's," said the lawyer. "Deliver it personally to Mr. Firbank—with my compliments. Tell Mr. Firbank that the ribbon has not even been untied."

When the boy had gone, Gillian rang for Miss Lawrence. That capable young woman entered the room with fire in her eyes. Gillian's last words to her still smarted.

In his kindliest tones he said:

"Will you bring me all the data in the Kolster case? I am ready to tackle it now."

"Ah," breathed Miss Lawrence, "The Hazeltine law offices are back to normal again, are they?"

"Back to normal," agreed her affable employer.

And her eloquent eyes said: "Yes, they are! Until the next beauty in distress comes into this office!"

The telephone rang. Gillian smiled as the disgruntled voice of Jason Firbank boomed in his ear.

"That boy of yours has just delivered that package," said the jeweler. "Say! What's the big idea?"

"I was just wondering," said the genial Gillian, "if I could exchange that package for something suitable as a wedding present!"

THE END

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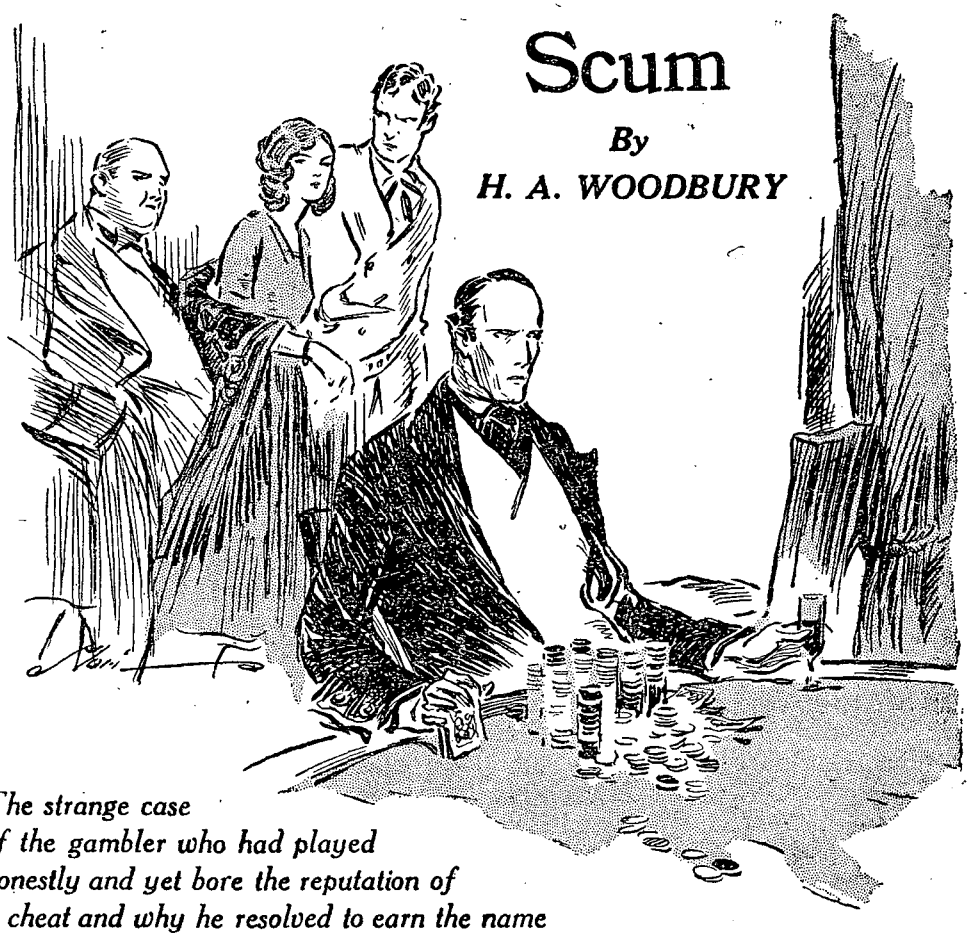
Scum

By

H. A. WOODBURY



The strange case of the gambler who had played honestly and yet bore the reputation of a cheat and why he resolved to earn the name

TEMPORARILY, David Mortimer was not gambling. His almost colorless face drawn, he sat very quietly beside his vacant table, sipping now and then from a tall iced and mint-garlanded drink.

But the drink, for all its pale green beauty, he scarcely saw. His blue eyes stared hawklike yet without particular objective through the sluggish haze of tobacco smoke which hung like a pall over the rear room of the Casino.

Mortimer sat alone. His lips settled into a thin red line. Alone— And he recalled that when he wasn't gambling, he usually did sit alone.

It was a fact which he surveyed not in any terms of philosophy, but simply as a fact—and, now that he was squarely confronted with it, as a rather devastating, overwhelming fact.

So intent was he, staring into space, that he did not notice Richard Bancroft as he came up.

"That was some run o' luck you had this afternoon," observed the miner.

There was admiration rather than envy or accusation in Bancroft's voice. His ruddy cheeks glowed.

Startled a little, Mortimer came out of the misty realms of fruitless introspection. Very faintly, his blue eyes smiled.

"Sit down, won't you?" The gambler's voice warmed in quick response to Bancroft's geniality.

Like Bancroft, Mortimer was some-

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where near forty. Though in other regards he was very unlike Bancroft. He had a polish—a very obvious flair, from black stock and green waistcoat to the immaculate part in his dark hair. His face was thin without being pinched.

Bancroft accepted the gambler's invitation. "I'm warnin' you, though," the miner said, "you ain't goin' to git me into any poker game. I don't play."

Mortimer smiled upon his guest.

"Then let me tell you you're wise," he said dryly. "No matter how straight the game you don't stand a chance against a professional."

Suddenly anxious to talk to some one, Mortimer became expansive.

"I don't mean all this talk about stacked decks or marked cards or sleight of hand," he laughed. "Those are the alibis people invent about me. They figure they're so clever that they couldn't have been licked if the game had been on the level.

"But, Lord, I don't have to cheat. All I have to do is watch the men I'm playing against. They give themselves away somehow." Mortimer sipped at his drink for a second. "Oh, I suppose it would be easy enough to cheat, sometimes. And I don't mind admitting that I've been tempted. But up to date I never have."

"Well," snapped a new voice, "we'd hardly expect a man like you to be tellin' us much different. It's funny how every gambler you meet is the only honest one."

Uninvited, a rather debonair young man of about twenty-seven or so had taken a seat at the table. His lips moved into a self-satisfied grin as he smiled at Bancroft.

Something in Mortimer snapped. All his ranklings of the afternoon seemed to crystallize. But he made no move.

His blue eyes simply studied the man calmly. It was hardly in Mortimer's nature to seek out a brawl. To a gambler brawls came often enough, unsolicited.

After a moment he went on, ignoring the newcomer:

"That's why I don't like a run of luck like I had this afternoon. Bull luck like that some times looks suspicious to a hot-headed loser. He may pull a gun on you. I'd rather just peg along."

The new voice interrupted again.

"So it was just luck, then, when you held queens full, this afternoon, against two other full houses?"

"Just luck," nodded Mortimer.

The newcomer snorted his disgust. With a knowing grin at Bancroft he rose and moved away.

"Friend of yours?" asked Mortimer, following the man with angry eyes.

Bancroft nodded. "Young ranch owner round here. Joe Wilson's his name. Wants to trade me his place for some of my claims."

Bancroft smiled. "I don't know nothin' 'bout ranchin', but I'm figgerin' to make the deal. I got a daughter, you see—maybe you've noticed her here with me. An' now that her mother's dead, it seems to me ranchin' ud be better for the two of us than my havin' to drag her over these here hills with me."

Mortimer said nothing. For he was still looking after the disappearing Wilson—watching the man with undiminished anger.

Insults, day after day! Lord!

II.

As a matter of fact, Mortimer had not noticed that Bancroft had a daughter. He had scarcely noticed even the miner himself until the afternoon's chance encounter.

But now that it was evening, Mortimer found himself standing near a window of the Overland House, studying them. Bancroft and his daughter sat with this rancher, Wilson, under one of the swinging lamps in the dining room.

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Well off, but not wealthy; Mortimer surmised. The man's attitude this afternoon had borne that out—his refusal to gamble.

Not a case of striking it rich and wanting to plunge, then. Rather a case of a few claims with small but consistent yields. Certainly not a sucker.

Mortimer paused in cogitation. His eyes now rested on the girl. She was pretty—more than that. She was lovely, with a warmth and life which prettiness described with hopeless inadequacy.

Dressed in flowing pink, she sat across from her father, a quiet face resting meditatively against one hand. Now and again she smiled at Wilson.

Involuntarily, Mortimer winced. It wasn't right, her showering smiles on Wilson. Then his lips twisted in abrupt irony as he recalled that he really had nothing against the young man—nothing but an insult. And, really, he ought to be used to insults by now.

His smile became almost bitter. And he wondered suddenly just why he went on playing the game straight when not a man ever believed that he did. Was it fear of the consequences of doing otherwise?

Scarcely, he decided. He ran those risks, anyway. What was it, then? If you played the game at all, wasn't it logical to play it for all it was worth?

Mortimer continued to stare at the group in the dining room. The reason he had spoken to Bancroft at such length this afternoon was because Bancroft had been the first man in weeks who had addressed him in a civil fashion.

Men enough sought out his company, to be sure, but all were suspicious and very few were friendly. His lips compressed.

What a life! Why not, then, go all the way? Using your brain was one kind of skill. Using deft fingers wouldn't be so very much different.

His thoughts came to a sudden end. The trio was stirring; he must not be caught watching. He moved along the porch and swiftly down the steps.

Then, just as he reached the sidewalk, a young man careened drunkenly into him and brushed past. Mortimer halted to stare after the youth.

Something in his manner commanded attention. His face, for instance, in spite of its very obvious present dissipation, was frank and handsome. He was very young, only a boy.

Mortimer beheld him stagger up the steps.

The doors of the Overland House were opening now, and Bancroft and his daughter and Wilson were emerging. They appeared to notice neither Mortimer nor the youth.

Mortimer smiled. Wilson had told Bancroft, then, that the gambler was to be avoided. Oh, well— He was used to cuts.

The youth, however, refused to be unnoticed. He lurched uncertainly up to them.

"Listen," he began. "I'm goin' to have this out. I'm—"

Mortimer saw the girl shrink back, her face drawn in disgust.

And at this, Wilson struck out none too gently with his fists. The youth reeled and collapsed.

The trio moved on, but Mortimer noticed that the girl twice looked back.

Quickly, Mortimer came up to the boy. The young man was sitting up dazedly now, muttering to himself.

"Get up," Mortimer commanded. And he bent over to help the youth obey.

The boy's eyes flamed. "Where'd they go?" he demanded.

"Down the street, I think, but—"

"I'm going to kill that son of a—"

Mortimer cut him off. "You're going to sober up before you do anything."

"Try and stop me, will you? Then, by heavens, I'll kill you too."

The youth had wrenched himself

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free of Mortimer. He made a dive for his holster.

Mortimer did not move.

"Come along," he said firmly, adding as the boy stared at an empty holster, "I've got your gun."

The boy's face dropped.

Mortimer took his arm. "No use to start in shooting people, sonny. Juries aren't generous. Though"—he added to himself—"they might acquit you for killing me sooner than they'd acquit you for killing Wilson. I'm simply scum."

III.

By morning the boy was sober. Mortimer stood over his bed, studying him.

"Well," said the gambler, "tell me all about it. You're in love with Bancroft's daughter. And you're jealous of Wilson. I gathered that much."

The boy looked up sheepishly.

"I've got an awful headache," he said.

Mortimer grinned. "By which I infer you're not used to hard liquor."

The boy shook his head. "I wanted to drink last night, though. I wanted to get drunk. Let me think. Oh, yes, I was going to kill Wilson."

"It wouldn't have helped you."

The boy went on as if he had not heard: "Because he's cut me out with Lois. An' because that there ranch he's figgerin' to trade to Bancroft ain't worth what he's askin' for it. That's the way he makes his livin'. Cheatin' people in deals. He ain't got guts enough to come out an' rob."

The boy's face shone.

"I been tellin' Lois he's out to gyp her dad. Only she won't believe me. Thinks I'm tellin' her that just 'cause I'm jealous."

Mortimer nodded. "Logical enough on her part.

"And," he said, taking a seat near the bed, "if you ask me, last night's performance didn't help you with her. You'll find that if you had any hope before, it's gone now."

The boy went a little pale. "Then—then, what should I do?"

"Forget her," smiled Mortimer; "put her out of your head."

"And let Wilson swindle her father?"

"There are some things in life," said Mortimer rather bluntly, "which can't be helped. Rather unpleasant, but true. However, go ahead and make a fool out of yourself if you want to."

Mortimer watched, then, for two days while Phil Marlow did make a fool of himself—watched with just a slight touch of satisfaction to behold another human being likewise buffeted by society. Phil's pleas fell on deaf ears. The trade went through. And Bancroft paid a cash bonus as well.

And as Mortimer watched, there gradually grew in him an idea.

He came up to Phil a few days later as the boy stood at the bar. He pushed the bottle aside.

"No use giving her the pleasure of seeing you go to the gutter," he said, "come here."

He led the boy away to one of the rear tables.

He smiled as he sat down.

"Life's given both of us rather a raw deal," he said. "Why don't we face the world together? It'd be easier if each of us had somebody to lean on—if each of us had a pal to talk to."

He studied the boy calmly.

"What I'm suggesting is this. You could meet people for me—get them into games. Then when I came up, you'd introduce me. They'd be sure I was on the level, because you look so damn young and—"

"You don't mean, do you," the boy demanded, "that you're not on the level?"

Mortimer's eyes narrowed. This was a squeamishness he hadn't looked for. The boy was not quite the weakling he had taken him for. He had yes-

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tiges of conscience. As I had once thought Mortimer.

He replied simply: "I never have cheated." Which was the truth. He went on in a moment: "I'd pay you a good salary as my—well, as my secretary, I suppose. We'd travel all through this country."

Phil's face lit up. "Gee," he said, "I'd sure like travelin' round thataway, but— Well, I'd sorta like to stay here a few more days. It seems to me if I could convince Lois that Wilson really was a bum, I'd stand a show there. I found out about some other shady things he's pulled. But, of course, just now she won't listen to me."

Mortimer laughed easily. "Oh, we'll be here for some little time, I guess. Till they make it too hot for us," he added, smiling wryly.

IV.

ALONE in his room that night Mortimer practiced dealing. He spent the entire evening simply shuffling—again and again. And as he dealt, he watched his fingers in the mirror.

They moved naturally. No one would guess. Or—if people guessed, they wouldn't be able to prove anything.

Hence, the situation would be no different than it already was. For he had always been suspected.

His grin became ironic. Since people expected the worst of him, why not give them their money's worth?

And people did consider him scum. Even Bancroft who had been kind that one afternoon had cooled and grown distant.

Mortimer rolled and lit a cigarette. It was going to be easier, now that he had a companion. The boy, of course, would never suspect that everything wasn't straight.

Until—well, later, to be sure, he might suspect. But by that time they'd be such pals that it wouldn't matter.

Mortimer thought suddenly of Bancroft's daughter. Beautiful—God! Too beautiful! He hated her for the beauty which had had the power to wound a man, to drive him into the gutter.

The boy proved, as Mortimer had imagined, an effective come-on. That is, when Phil suggested a game to a stranger, the stranger took one look at Phil's youthful countenance and thought "sucker." The stranger was more than anxious to play.

And when Phil's "friend" sauntered up to be introduced and to join the game, the stranger was usually so intent on plucking his fledgling that he scarcely looked up. The friend had his roll before he really knew what had happened.

Mortimer was, however, never piggish. For he had observed that you left a man in better spirits and with more faith in the game, if you didn't quite clean him. Also, Mortimer did not care to awaken suspicion in Phil.

The gambler smiled in contentment these days. It had never occurred to him that he would enjoy this swindling as much as he did. It was actually joyous, this hitting back at a world which had been unjust.

There were, however, disconcerting moments, too—one afternoon in particular when his fingers had been cold and when he had all but given himself away.

His heart sank. But, fortunately, no one had chanced to be watching. Still, as a result of the shock, he had spent the rest of the afternoon dealing honestly.

Luck—sheer luck; that was all that had saved him. He set his teeth. He mustn't depend on luck again. His skill must become flawless. For luck was a harlot goddess, a changing wanton.

Bad luck, and there would be exposure, some day. Then there would be two guns swiftly drawn—smoke—death, maybe.

Oh, well, it was such an end that

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he wanted. A blaze of glory! Damn it, yes! There'd be something grand about a final struggle so meteoric that its brilliance might lend meaning and glamour to a whole useless life!

V.

MEANTIME he felt himself drawn closer to Phil. It was enjoyable, having a companion to talk to after all these years of working alone. Events took on deeper meaning when you had some one to share them with.

And Phil believed in him. That helped too. He didn't feel quite so bitter. He recalled, incidentally, that it was the first time in his life that any one ever had believed in him.

What irony! When this was the first time in his life that he had ever been dishonest.

He felt, however, no remorse. He had cast his last scruples to the winds. He was headed downward, gayly—joyfully, with a touch of bravado. Headed toward an inevitable smash. But, oh, he thought, how glorious a smash when it comes!

He felt better than he had felt in years. For now, all struggle was over within him. It was no longer a continual battle with conscience.

Conscience was dead. Except—well, he hoped to manage things so that Phil wouldn't be caught in his own debacle. He'd hate to hurt Phil.

For the boy had improved under his care. He had ceased drinking. He carried himself more like a man.

"You know," said Phil, one morning, "I had a chat with Lois last night. She really didn't intend talkin' to me, but I reckon I sort of forced her to."

Mortimer looked up sharply, his heart sinking. "They say she's going to marry Joe Wilson," he said.

Phil nodded. "So they say. But I ain't so sure. That is—well, I reckon they's still a chance for me. You see," the boy went on, "Wilson did gyp 'em on that trade. An' sooner or later they'll find out. Then—since Lois really ain't got anything against me, I'll be sittin' pretty again."

Mortimer's eyes narrowed.

"They don't know ranching," he remarked. "It 'll take them a long time to get the truth. And in the meantime she'll marry Wilson. You'll only be getting hurt again if you start playing round there. What more do you want? You've a pal now and all the money you can spend. If you go back to that girl, you'll end up a drunken bum in the gutter again."

Phil flushed.

"Not this time," he said after a moment. "I've learned my lesson. An' I've learned somethin' else from you. If you got a pal to tie to, things ain't so hard. Reckon now if that pal was a girl, things 'd be easier still."

Mortimer did not answer.

But that night after the session in the Casino, he went to his room to pack. He surveyed Phil's room next door. The boy had slipped out of the game early. Probably had gone to bed.

Well, he wouldn't disturb him. But to-morrow, he'd tell him that they were moving on. It was time, anyway. There was a gold strike at Hillside, and that would mean big stakes.

It occurred to him that the boy might protest. Yes, undoubtedly, Phil would protest. But Mortimer smiled to himself. Phil could be managed.

He paused abruptly—for just as he was thinking of the boy, it seemed to him that he heard Phil's voice, drifting in through the open window.

"Lois," Phil was pleading. "Can't you see?"

A girl's voice answered.

"I do like you, Phil, but I've promised Joe Wilson."

"Joe Wilson's a bum; he gypped your dad on that trade."

"He did not."

"Wait and see."

"And, anyway," the girl went on, "I can't see what you like about that gambler."

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Phil's voice became defiant. "Now not a word about Mortimer. He's on the level. He took me in when everybody else was ready to give me the boot. It's on account of him I'm a man again."

Lois's voice was cool. "Any man who cheats at cards is the lowest form of—"

Phil cut her off. "Mortimer doesn't cheat. He's on the level, I tell you."

Mortimer turned back from the window. Yes, Phil would be easy—very easy. For the boy realized the debt which he owed his benefactor. Mortimer grinned.

It was, perhaps, a half hour later when Phil knocked on his door.

"Saw your light," explained the boy, "and I thought I'd drop in." His eyes scanned the room. "Say," he began, "what's the meanin' of all this?" He pointed to the half filled bag.

Mortimer smiled. "We're leaving in the morning. Gold strike at Hillside. There'll be big money there, son. And life! Dancing girls and bright lights! You've never seen a real rip-roaring town."

Phil pursed his lips.

And Mortimer waited for the objection. But Phil's words were in a slightly different vein.

"Say," the boy demanded, "don't you ever have bad luck at cards?"

Mortimer all but went pale. This was so unexpected.

"Why—"

"I mean," Phil began, "it does look funny. I've been talking to Lois, and she thinks— Of course I don't— But still, if she does think the way she does, I got to consider it. Maybe it 'd be better if you went on to Hillside alone."

The color came back to Mortimer's face in a crimson tide.

"You idiot," he exploded. "Don't you realize that if she thinks I'm crooked, she thinks you are, too?"

Phil paled.

"But—what do you mean?" he demanded.

"I mean," said Mortimer curtly, "that you can't leave me now. You've thrown your fate in with mine."

Phil stared at him deliberately.

"Lois would believe me if I told her the truth," he said. "She likes me. And I think if she didn't feel she couldn't break her promise to Joe Wilson, she'd even love me."

The two men stood staring at each other.

Then Mortimer laughed dryly. "If I were caught cheating, would she still believe you?"

Phil nodded. "I think so." His eyes grew suddenly narrow as he caught Mortimer's full implication. "You don't mean you have been cheating?"

Mortimer's laugh was metallic. "Of course, you poor fool."

Without a word, Phil turned on his heel to stride for the door.

But Mortimer's deep, booming voice stopped him. "Oh, no you don't."

The boy turned to find himself face to face with a drawn revolver.

"We don't dissolve partnership quite as easily as all that. Sit down."

Mechanically, the boy obeyed.

"Now," said Mortimer, "you want to call it quits, do you?"

Phil nodded. He smiled suddenly. "I'm—I'm grateful for all you've done for me, but don't you see—"

"Shut up!" commented Mortimer. He was silent for a long moment. "Let me think now."

The gambler drew a step nearer.

"All right," he said, "quits it is—only." His voice mounted again. "Not till after to-morrow. You've got to arrange one more game for me."

Phil drew himself up. "And if I refuse?"

"I'll shoot you down, here and now."

"I could promise and still not do it," the boy reminded him.

Mortimer smiled.

"But you wouldn't go back on your word. Besides, if you did, I'd get you

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sooner or later. And also—this ought to appeal to you. I want a chance to nick Joe Wilson. I've been gunning for him for a long time. He ought to be pretty flush after selling that ranch. Give me a chance to trim him and get a good stake, and then I'll leave you."

Phil considered.

"You can git him in a game as well as I can," he said finally.

Mortimer shook his head.

"He'll never sit in on any game I'm playing in. But if the game were already started and I happened in on it, he'd have to stay for a few hands." Mortimer's finger played with the trigger. "Promise?"

Pale, Phil nodded. "All right, but—"

"But, nothing," snapped Mortimer. "Get out."

After Phil had left, some of the brusqueness fell from Mortimer's face. He smiled almost sadly. Yet—curiously enough—he did not feel bitter.

After all, this was best. He wasn't being fair to Phil. Life lay ahead of the boy. He had no wish to ruin that life for him. For he was honestly fond of Phil.

Yes, better to have this break now, while the boy had some chance, no matter how feeble, to win Lois. And if Phil felt so confident that if he went to her with the truth she would believe him, there was a meager chance that she might.

"Yes," thought Mortimer, "she will believe him. For she'll be able to see the truth in his manner—in his eyes."

Mortimer stared at the floor.

It was that very frankness—that very ingenuousness in the boy that he had been capitalizing. He smiled.

But it wasn't losing the monetary value of that openness that hurt him. He was going to miss most of all the boy's companionship. It would be rather hard to face things alone again. Still, with the stake he'd win from Wilson—

Wilson! He scowled. What if the girl went ahead and married him? What if she believed Phil, yet still felt herself bound to the other man?

He leaned back to light a cigarette.

Well—damn it—that was the chance Phil had to take. Life was all chances. No beating the game by crooked dealing there.

He himself took chances in the bigger game. Some day his fingers might not be so clever. Some day, a hot-headed stranger was going to pull a gun.

He shook his head. No, not a chance in the world of that. He was by now, far too clever. The cards did what he wished. His fingers had grown deftly automatic. Whatever his worries, he need have none on that score.

Yet he lay awake a long time that night before he dozed off to sleep.

VI.

PHIL was all smiles when Mortimer met him the next morning.

"I've told Lois," the boy said, "and she's forgiven me, if I promise to leave you."

Mortimer's face lit up. "You mean, do you, she's promised to marry you?"

Phil shook his head. His smile disappeared.

"I don't know," he answered. "She still won't believe what I tell her about Wilson."

Mortimer laughed dryly. "You shouldn't have told her so much. You've hurt your own case. Now she's obstinate and won't see things that she might have noticed if you'd let her discover them for herself."

"I know," admitted Phil, "But what am I going to do?"

Mortimer smiled softly. And for a second he regarded the boy affectionately.

"Hope," he said, "hope that some miracle will open her eyes."

"I have hoped," said Phil, "all these weeks."

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Mortimer's mood suddenly changed.

"I want mostly strangers in to-day's game—all strangers except Wilson." He hesitated a second. "Wilson's been so busy courting Lois lately that I don't think he realizes you're my come-on. He'll be glad enough to try to trim a rival in love."

Phil opened his mouth.

"No welching," Mortimer commanded, "that is the last favor I'll ever ask you."

Phil's face paled, but he moved away to do as he had been bidden.

Accordingly, perhaps an hour later, Mortimer sidled up to a table where Phil and Wilson and three strangers sat playing.

Phil introduced him, and he took his seat. He caught Wilson's suspicious glance.

Would the man leave the game at once? He hardly thought so. He was banking on his unwillingness to make a scene. And he had waited until Wilson's winnings were such that it might be embarrassing for him to leave precipitously.

This was indeed the situation. Wilson, though obviously reluctant, lingered.

The game went on quietly—small pots. Two to Wilson, one to a stranger, one to Mortimer.

Then, presently, there came a big pot on Mortimer's deal. But Mortimer dropped out. And after a great deal of action, the pot went to Wilson, who held four kings.

"Gosh, what a hand!" exclaimed one stranger. "An' me holdin' aces full."

Phil watched, a little puzzled. But the boy decided that Mortimer aimed to let things go on honestly at first in order to give Wilson more confidence.

The deal came round to Mortimer again. Once more, Wilson won a large pot. He held kings full over jacks full. And the same stranger contributed, scowling darkly.

The deal came to Mortimer a third time. He grasped the pack firmly. And then—just as he was about to deal Wilson his last card, there was a shout.

The stranger who had been twice trimmed reached over to seize Mortimer's wrist, just as Mortimer was taking an ace from the bottom of the deck.

"I saw you," he shouted; "you two are in cahoots!"

Wilson, taken by surprise and totally unprepared for this turn of events, stood motionless for a fatal second. Then, suddenly realizing his plight, he reached for his gun.

But the delay had, indeed, been fatal. There was a shot and Wilson sank to the floor. Another shot now! And Mortimer crumpled.

Only — bystanders remarked that Mortimer had made no move to defend himself.

Later, in his room at the Overland House, Mortimer smiled up from his bed as Phil came in to him.

"How's—how's Wilson?" he asked

"Dead," said Phil, his face white.

Mortimer's blue eyes smiled.

"That's too bad; I really didn't mean to have him killed," he said slowly. He paused to cough. "All I aimed to do was disgrace him."

He grinned. "Nobody would have believed his story that I was dealing him winning hands just out of charity." Mortimer strove to laugh. "And it struck me as rather humorous that the only thing that 'd make Lois wise to him was something he didn't do. But I sure had a hard time cheating obviously enough."

Phil took the gambler's hand. Tears streamed down the boy's face.

"And how—how are you?"

Again Mortimer's eyes smiled. "Don't know, sonny," he grinned. "Maybe I'll get well, and maybe I won't." His eyes were kind. "It doesn't make much difference, really. I'm happy anyway."

THE END

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Argonotes.

The Readers' Viewpoint

MANY readers have admired the heading illustrations appearing in ARGOSY, and frequently have expressed a desire to have one of them for framing purposes.

These original pen and ink drawings are printed admirably for that purpose. They are about eight by ten inches on white cardboard. Framed and hung on the wall, they are both decorative and, at the same time, pleasant reminders of a good story by one of your favorite writers.

We have a limited supply of these original drawings on hand and are offering them to you, free of charge, one for each ten "Your Favorite Coupons" filled in and mailed to us. The coupons must be from different issues of the magazine; and this offer holds good only while our supply of the drawings lasts.

Start the coupon habit with this issue, and be among the first to get one of these good looking drawings. It is not necessary to hold the coupons until you have ten. Send them in as you finish each issue; when your tenth arrives, we shall send you your drawing.

SUGGESTIONS from readers are always welcome—and often bear immediate fruit. The suggestion embodied in Mr. Anderson's letter we passed on to John Holden; his novelette, "The Last Thousand Miles," which appears this week, is the result. Mr. Anderson, we thank you!

Timmer, N. Dak.

Please ask Mr. John Holden to write a five-part story on the Los Angeles to New York Marathon.

Millions of people have seen it, and whole world read about it, so Mr. Holden should make a great name for himself by writing a story about it.

I would gladly pay three dollars for a good story covering this Marathon.

C. H. ANDERSON.

Bouquets are nice. We receive plenty of them like this one from a satisfied subscriber:

Rotterdam Jct., N. Y.

Inclose check for four dollars for year's subscription. Bet your sweet life I want the magazine—never was without it for single week for more years than I can remember. I believe your magazine is just right, you have different stories, which should please all the readers. I first read the short stories and novelettes, then place the magazine back in bookcase until serial story is complete, then I start the story. Leave your magazine just as it is, it is A No. 1 magazine.

JOHN M. HUSS.

But sometimes along comes a brickbat and gives us something to think about. Like this:

Brooklyn, N. Y.

I cannot help but express my disappointment in your magazine. Lately your type of stories have been inferior, and so monotonous, being almost all of the Western type. If you are going to print all Western stories, why not change the name of your magazine also, as well as the policy?

I was a reader of the ARGOSY for years, but if the present type of stories is continued, will certainly cancel my order for same at the newsdealer. I like a Western story occasionally, but too much of one thing is tiresome. If I wanted to read all Western stories I could buy a regular Western magazine.

Also your short stories are not in the same class as published formerly. Why don't you let us have a story from Hulbert Footner, and from some of the other good writers?

I know that canceling my one subscription won't put you out of business, but I am heartily sorry for the change, as I looked forward to reading the ARGOSY every week, but lately have found very little real good reading in it.

"A FORMER ARGOSY FAN."

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For the benefit of this reader, and those like him who are not keen for Western fiction, let us say that while ARGOSY always will publish good first-rate Western stories—just as we publish a good story laid in any other field—we will materially reduce the number of Western stories in the coming issues. Those which we do publish will be so excellent that we hope even readers as unenthusiastic about Western stories as this one will applaud them.

Remember the first copy of the ARGOSY you read—the copy that made a regular reader of you? Why were you "sold on it"? Probably there was some particular story that made you an ARGOSY fan. We would like mighty well to know what that story was. Here is the way three ARGOSY converts were made:

Keating, Ore.

I would like to express my opinion of the ARGOSY. About a year ago I got some magazines. Among them was the ARGOSY. I went back next week and ordered it to be saved for me. I have been a constant reader since then. I sure hope we have some more railroad stories and detective stories. I think "The Return of George Washington" was a wow. Leave the ARGOSY as it is. FRANK ARTHUR.

Haileybury, Ontario, Canada.

About six months ago I picked up a copy of your magazine and started reading just to pass the time, but soon I was really interested in it. The first story that I read was "The Return of George Washington." I became very interested and tried my best to get the next number, but they were either all sold out or the store did not stock them. At last a traveling friend got it for me and ever since then I have ordered them in advance. "Kerry of the Air Mail" was very interesting, coming as it did so soon after the successful Atlantic and Pacific flights. I wish you would print more air and scientific stories. "Beyond the Stars" was good as one of these, and also Garret Smith's "Slaves of the Wire." Other good stories were "Adventurers All," "Luckett of the Moon," "The Eagle's Brood," "For Country," "Queen of Clubs," "Somewhere in Nevada," "Blue Steel," in fact, all the stories are great. I think your best short story and novelette writers are Garret Smith, Gordon Stiles, and Ben Conlon.

I noticed a fellow raving about the stories of the "imaginary worlds." I think these are quite a change from some of the common romantic tales. I wouldn't mind if you would print some more stories about Scrub Smith and Bill Norman. A. SCOTT.

Chicago, Ill.

I cannot say that I started reading the ARGOSY since it was the *Golden Argosy*, for I just began about a year ago. Boy, what I was missing! The first story I read was "The Pancake Princess," by Fred MacIsaac. That was the start of my wild rush on Thursday.

Other good stories were "Forged Faces," "Seven Footprints to Satan," "Desperate Chances," "Eyes West!" and many others, but "The Return of George Washington" was the best.

As far as I'm concerned, leave the ARGOSY the way it is, with its Western and war stories, and please give us a few athletic serials.

MELVIN R. JARVIS.

What story started you on the ARGOSY trail?

Here's an ideal way to enjoy your ARGOSY:

O'Cala, Fla.

I have been a regular reader of the ARGOSY for five years and have no kick to make, for all writers and their stories are real good. To take a boat and drift over Silver Springs with the latest ARGOSY is my "seventh heaven," as Silver Springs, in Marion County, Florida, like the ARGOSY, is the finest of its kind. Tell Don Waters to give us another railroad story. Hoping the ARGOSY stays as is, I am a satisfied reader. K. L. A.

YOUR CHOICE COUPON

Editor, ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY,
280 Broadway, N. Y. C., N. Y.

The stories I like best in this issue of the magazine are as follows:

1.....

2.....

3.....

4.....

5.....

I did not like.....

because.....

Name.....

Street.....

City.....*State*.....

6-30

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Looking Ahead!

Have you ever considered the possibilities of the marvelous television—now in its infancy, but probably soon to be an every-day utility? Have you ever considered what it will mean to be able to see the one to whom you are talking?

"YOU'VE KILLED PRIVACY!"

A Complete Novelette

By GARRET SMITH

reveals the terror this far-reaching new invention brings to the hearts of the underworld. For them the all-seeing eye spells doom. So crime locks horns with science—and a hair-trigger tale is the result.

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A Quick-Fire Western Novel

By DONALD BAYNE HOBART

brings back the Whistling Waddy in a Western story that is different. A murder mystery—a corrupt criminal ring—and the Whistling Waddy right in the middle of it with both guns going!

IN THE ISSUE OF JULY 7TH

ARGOSY

ALL-STORY WEEKLY

"First In Fiction" ***Out Every Wednesday***

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Talk Your Problems Over With The World's Leading Authorities

IF you have selling and advertising problems . . . bring them to the International Advertising Association Convention and Exposition, Masonic Temple, Detroit, July 8-12 . . . and discuss them with authorities from America, Europe, Australia and the Orient. In addition to meetings and discussions, there will be 355 exhibits . . . everyone a veritable gold mine of ideas on more efficient and more effective merchandising.

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Convention Committee

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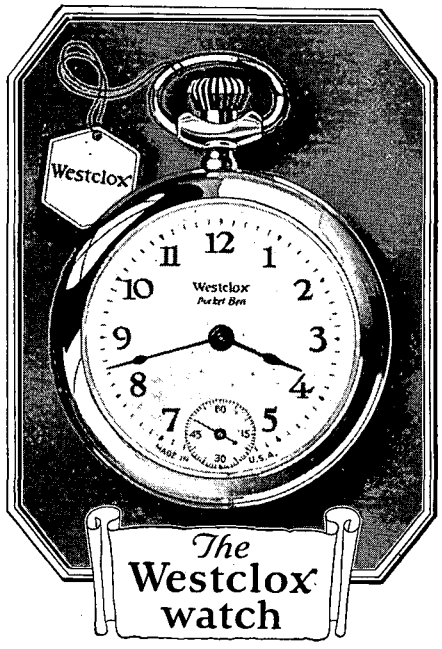

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BE READY!

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